

**The Uses of Reason in Critical Judgement:  
Commentaries on the Turner Prize**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Through an analysis of critical reviews and other commentaries on the annual Turner Prize shortlist exhibitions, I examine a philosophical problem which has put into question the rational basis for evaluation in art criticism: the lack of any agreed criteria for the evaluation of artworks. This problem has been most often addressed within philosophical aesthetics through two contrasting approaches: the attempt to formulate evaluative criteria, and the denial that such criteria are either possible or necessary. My response to this meta-critical issue is an interdisciplinary study, in the form of an analysis of published commentaries on the Turner Prize, that examines theories of critical evaluation against an empirical investigation of actual critical practice.

The Turner Prize has a number of advantages as a case study. Extensive media coverage of the competition means that it is possible to study a wide range of sources intended for the art-going public, that contain a large body of examples of comparative critical evaluation, and as an annual event it offers the opportunity for both synchronic and diachronic analyses. Moreover, the regular presence of artists whose work has been characterised as 'conceptual, ensures that many of the commentaries focus on an area of art that presents a particular challenge to aesthetic theory and critical practice. In order to develop a critique of criteria based approaches, the contrasting approaches to art criticism taken by Noel Carroll and Frank Sibley are explored within an analysis of the critical reasons given to justify evaluations of Turner Prize exhibits. Suggestions are offered for ways of developing alternative approaches, drawing upon theories of the aesthetic developed by Suzanne Langer and Kendall Walton.

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## 1. The Turner Prize and the Problem of Evaluation

### *The Problem of Evaluation*

Each year when the Turner Prize is awarded, the Tate Gallery issues a short statement to explain why the winner's artworks were chosen as the best. In the weeks leading up to the announcement of the winner, the work of all the nominees will have been reviewed and appraised many times in the press and those critics too will have given explanations for the judgements they have made. When critics pass judgements on works of art, there is an assumption that they are not simply offering their own opinions or confiding their personal tastes. Their statements are read as normative and they seem to offer reasons for their judgements. Since reasons are given to support judgements, it might seem safe to assume that those justifications are based on general principles: that some kind of agreed criteria are applied.

However, the controversial nature of the Prize and the avant gardism of many of the nominees have prompted some to wonder what criteria are actually being applied, both by the Turner Prize jury and by the professional art critics whose published verdicts are often at odds with that of the jury and also often at odds with each other. These questions about the criteria by which excellence in art is judged are not confined to debates about the Turner Prize. They have been a very longstanding feature of debates within the field of philosophical aesthetics; current academic papers on the subject regularly address issues raised in the writings of Hume and Kant.

If the Turner Prize jury wanted to find assessment criteria to use in their work, there is no shortage of possible criteria on offer: beauty, skill, didactic value, emotional expressiveness and originality are among the many that have been suggested by writers on the subject. Monroe Beardsley<sup>1</sup> proposed

<sup>1</sup> *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* 1958

coherence, unity and intensity as the three criteria; for Clive Bell it was what he called significant form.<sup>2</sup>

However, it would not be a straightforward matter to decide which of these criteria are the correct ones to apply to The Turner Prize; indeed it is not a straightforward matter to decide which of these criteria are the correct ones to apply to art in general. The problem is not that there are no criteria, but that there are too many. Not all the criteria that have been proposed are compatible with each other; different suggested criteria often reflect different views about the nature of art and its purpose. There is no one set of (what have been called) aesthetic<sup>3</sup> principles that commands unanimous approval. One problem that dogs any attempt to formulate such principles is that it is often found that their application seems to inevitably throw up exceptional cases or yield results that seem perverse. As Sydney Hook describes the problem:

Just as soon as anyone offers a criterion or rule for a judgement of excellence, someone else will show that in fact we make judgements of excellence, which are widely shared by competent critics, independently of the criterion, or that some work of art to which the criterion or rule clearly applied was not uniformly judged excellent by competent critics.<sup>4</sup>

This has led some to be sceptical about the possibility of formulating any universally agreed criteria and to deny the need for such aesthetic principles. Frank Sibley<sup>5</sup> was one of those who took that view, and we will consider some aspects of his approach to the role of the critic within this study.

If there is a problem with the reasons critics offer in support of their judgements, then that has significant implications. If the relationship between critics' judgements and the reasons they give for those judgements is questionable, then it might be said that the very reasonableness of criticism as an activity must also be in question. If the task of those who claim that

<sup>2</sup> *Art* 1913

<sup>3</sup> I use the term 'aesthetic', here and throughout, as defined by Sibley in *Aesthetic Concepts*, i.e., denoting a quality that requires 'taste', sensitivity or perceptiveness in order to be discerned, rather than a quality that is readily discernible to anyone who has normal vision.

<sup>4</sup> Hook (ed.) *Art & Philosophy: a symposium*. Introduction p49

<sup>5</sup> *Approach to Aesthetics* 2001

evaluation is impossible, unless based on critical criteria, has been to formulate those criteria or explain their absence, the task of those who deny the possibility of general criteria has been to explain how critical evaluation can nonetheless claim to be a rational activity.

Of course, for the professional critic, one possible way of dissolving the problem might be to conclude that evaluation is no more than expression of preference and has no place in critical practice. Indeed, there is evidence of the extent to which non-evaluative critical practices have taken hold in the field of professional art criticism. In 2003 a survey conducted in the United States found that three quarters of professional art critics believed that the evaluation of artworks was the least important aspect of their work.<sup>6</sup>

In 2009 Noel Carroll published *On Criticism*<sup>7</sup>, partly in an attempt to counter this apparent ambivalence on the part of professional art critics about the importance of evaluation. While the survey appeared to show that most professional art critics considered the evaluation of artworks to be peripheral or irrelevant to their work, Carroll argued that evaluation is the central and essential purpose of criticism. In his view, the downgrading of evaluation would amount to a dereliction of duty on the part of the critic. Carroll places the blame for this retreat from critical evaluation on the emergence of philosophical positions and critical fashions that have led critics to feel that, 'there is something counter-productive, suspect, illegitimate, or even impossible about regarding criticism as essentially evaluative.'<sup>8</sup>

In the course of his argument for evaluation he challenges a number of the anti-evaluative arguments and assumptions that have emerged from a range of twentieth-century philosophical tendencies and ideas, ranging from anti-intentionalism to post-modernist critical theory.

Carroll also attempts to counter the arguments of those who would downgrade critical evaluation on the grounds that, if there are no agreed standards

<sup>6</sup> Rubinstein

<sup>7</sup> Carroll 2009

<sup>8</sup> Carroll p19

against which the artwork can be measured, any evaluation given by a critic must be purely subjective. In response to that argument, Carroll denies that it is impossible to formulate appropriate criteria against which an artwork can be evaluated. He offers a model of criteria-based evaluation, arguing that it represents a version of the approach that is not vulnerable to the difficulties that have beset earlier attempts to formulate critical principles. We will examine how that model might work in the context of the Turner Prize.

Sibley took a quite different view on this question. Like Carroll, he saw evaluation as an important part of the role of the critic, but he did not believe that the formulation of aesthetic principles was possible, nor did he see the necessity for it. He emphasised the critical importance of basing evaluations on perceptual judgements of individual artworks. The skill of the critic lies in the ability to perceive the aesthetic qualities of an artwork and then the skill to communicate those qualities to others, aiming to open people's eyes to significant features of the work. In the absence of general criteria, the critic's role is to expose the particular aesthetic qualities of each individual artwork, drawing the viewers' attention to those qualities through description, gesture, analysis, the use of metaphors and so on, in order that the viewers are moved to see those qualities for themselves.

However, the difficulty for those who deny that art can be judged against criteria is to show how, in the absence of criteria providing a logical connection between critical judgements and the reasons given to support those judgements, the critic's evaluation, however well expressed, can be regarded as anything other than a statement of subjective personal opinion. Moreover, for the critics covering the Turner Prize there is a requirement for the critics to do more than perceive and communicate the aesthetic qualities of individual artworks in isolation. They are also required to make explicit comparative evaluations of the work of the different shortlisted artists. Sibley's picture of the critic does not suggest an obvious methodology; the critic's ability to perceive and communicate the aesthetic merits of the work does not in itself provide a basis for arriving at comparative evaluations.

As I have said, the question of on what basis we can justify a claim that an artwork is beautiful, or that it is moving, or that one artwork is better than another, is a longstanding issue within aesthetics. This study will enquire into some aspects of that issue, but the approach taken will not be to do so solely by engaging with philosophical debates relevant to the issue, but also by looking at how this issue is dealt with in practice by experienced professional art critics. For that purpose I have looked to the commentaries surrounding the Turner Prize as a source of evidence.

### *Why the Turner Prize?*

My approach to this problem is to explore the perspectives provided by different theories of critical evaluation by placing them in dialogue with an empirical examination of actual critical practice in the visual arts. Critical evaluation of the visual arts has provided many of the classic examples used by key figures in the philosophical debate and it offers rich scope for comparative studies of critical evaluations across time and between well-defined critical schools. The Turner Prize provides an excellent source of critical writing for this study. I will briefly sketch in the background to the Prize in order to explain why this is so.

The Prize was originally set up in 1984 with the ambition of promoting interest in contemporary British art, in the same way that the Booker Prize raised public awareness of contemporary English fiction writing. It was named after J M W Turner who had left a bequest to the Royal Academy in his will, on condition they presented a cash prize for 'the best Landscape every two years'<sup>9</sup>. Though the Royal Academy had taken Turner's bequest, they never honoured that condition of his will. The establishment of the Prize was presented partly as a way of making good on that commitment, but the use of Turner's name was controversial at the time and has remained so since. When the current director of the Tate, Nicholas Serota was appointed in 1988, the future of the exhibition was placed in some doubt, and the survival of the

<sup>9</sup> Button p18

prize was further jeopardised in 1990, when the Wall Street investment banking firm who had been the major sponsor went spectacularly bankrupt. The Prize was suspended for a year and by the time it was re-instituted in 1991, having found media sponsorship from Channel Four television, there had been a reconsideration of its role and purpose. New criteria were laid out and a format put in place that better exploited the potential of the higher public profile offered by the new media partnership. It is in this second and current period of the Prize that it has established a position as a forum for annual national debate about the value of art, and it is this period that provides the evidence used within this study.

The format that was put in place in 1991 has not substantially changed since then. The Prize is awarded to 'a British artist under fifty for an outstanding exhibition or other presentation of their work in the twelve months preceding'.<sup>10</sup> The jury changes annually, but it is always chaired by the Director of the Tate, Nicholas Serota. The shortlist of four artists is chosen from a long list of nominees. Initially, nominations mainly came from those who might be considered art world insiders, but over time, and at least partly in response to press criticism, the process has been opened out to encourage more members of the general public to make nominations. The names of the four selected artists are announced in May, and each of them exhibits work in a joint shortlist exhibition, which takes place in the autumn. The show is usually mounted at Tate Britain, but occasionally in recent years it has been held at other museums outside London.

One important point that is sometimes lost in the commentaries is that the four nominees are not judged on the work they show in the shortlist exhibition, but on the work for which they were nominated, normally an exhibition that they have mounted in the previous year. The winner is announced in a televised event at the beginning of December each year. The media sponsorship and keen public interest in the Turner Prize ensures good coverage in the press,

<sup>10</sup> Button p19

with discussion of the Prize not only in the arts reviews but also in the national news pages, in editorials and in opinion pieces by regular columnists.

Over the past three decades, the annual competition has produced a vast resource of critical writing. The format of the prize offers arts correspondents several opportunities to discuss the work. When the shortlist is announced in May, the newspapers publish profiles of the artists who have been nominated; there are reviews of the autumn exhibition and further coverage when the winner is announced in December. As the same person often writes these three published pieces, this sometimes gives us the opportunity to follow the critic's views as they develop over time.

The Turner Prize shortlist leads to a small number of pieces being very widely reviewed, so offering an excellent opportunity to compare a range of reviews of the same piece. As an annual exhibition, covered by leading professional critics, the Prize offers the chance of studying the evaluation arguments of a particular critic over a number of years. Moreover, the notoriety of the event encourages intensive media coverage of the exhibition, providing an opportunity to make structural comparisons of evaluative arguments from reviews in a wide range of publications, from daily newspapers to specialised journals of criticism.

The competitive nature of the event ensures that arguments in support of evaluative judgements tend to be more central to critical reviews than they are in general art reviewing. The Turner Prize has the effect of bringing questions about the value of artworks out from the review sections and on to the news pages. The perennial controversies surrounding the Turner Prize encourage critics to make their arguments in support of evaluative judgements explicit. There is one caveat to bear in mind when we compare and contrast the reviews of different critics: that is it is not always possible to know to what extent reviews are influenced by each other. We cannot be certain whether different commentators have used similar language because they have independently come to the same conclusions about a work or whether they have been consciously or unconsciously influenced by each other's writings.

The strong showing of conceptual artists in the shortlists ensures that many reviews focus on an area of art that has, over the years, provided many key examples and counter examples discussed in recent theories of aesthetic value. The dominance of conceptualism reflected in the Tate shortlists has been one of the causes of the controversies that have followed the Prize over the years. In 2002 Ivan Massow was forced to resign as chairman of the Institute of Contemporary Arts after writing an article in the *New Statesman* attacking conceptual art as 'pretentious, self-indulgent, craftless tat'.<sup>11</sup> Later the same year, the junior culture minister Kim Howells received a great deal of media attention for publicly criticising the work on show at the Turner Prize shortlist exhibition. On the feedback card provided by the Tate to collect comments from the public, he wrote, 'If this is the best British artists can produce then British art is lost. It is cold, mechanical, conceptual bullshit.' In a post-script, he extended his critique beyond the work itself, on to the supporting commentary of artists and curators: 'PS The attempts at contextualisation are particularly pathetic and symptomatic of a lack of conviction.'<sup>12</sup> This condemnation by a government minister, of work being shown in a leading publicly funded institution, is an indication of the temperature of the debate around conceptual art. The amount of prominent coverage Howell's remarks received in the press indicates a strong public interest in the issues.

The challenge to both art-critical practice and meta-critical theory offered by what has been called conceptual art is clearly evident within published commentaries on the Turner Prize. The origins of conceptualism arguably lie in Dadaism, that early twentieth century challenge to the values of art and the then prevailing ideas of aesthetics, and, in particular, in the Dadaist invention of the kind of artwork known as the ready-made. The ready-made is an object or artifact that was not originally intended to be an artwork, that has been selected by the artist and presented, often with little or no alteration, as an art object within the context of a museum, gallery or other art exhibition. First

<sup>11</sup> "Why I hate our official art" *New Statesman* 21 January 2002

<sup>12</sup> *Guardian* 1 November 2002

exhibited in 1917, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, a piece consisting of a mass-produced urinal is the probably the best known example of the ready-made.

If *Fountain* was a provocation intended to subvert and challenge notions of artistic value, it was an intervention of a kind that is still exercising critics nearly a century later. The nature of the challenge was dramatized in an exchange between the art critic Jonathan Jones and former Tate Media spokesman Simon Wilson in October 2007. Reviewing the Turner Prize retrospective exhibition, Jones states, 'The truth is that after 23 years of this we still don't have any lucid way of saying why one ready-made is better than another.'<sup>13</sup> Jones' mention of 23 years was a reference to the history of the Prize, but this issue has dogged critical theory and practice at least since the 'making' of *Fountain*. Jones points out that none of the traditional criteria are available to the critic when confronted with such work: 'when you get rid of technical achievement, get rid of excellence in painting or sculpting as standards of comparison, you are left with a messianic belief in the inspired artist'. The implication of Jones' remarks is that, denied the possibility of basing their judgements on criteria such as (what I will call) craft skills, the explanations given by critics, curators and the judges descend into mystification. In lieu of such criteria, Jones argues, 'what the Turner keeps falling back on instead is the oldest of all western ideas about art: the belief in God-given genius.'<sup>14</sup>

This review drew an irritable response from Simon Wilson, a former Tate Media spokesman. Denying the charge that there can be no criteria for judging such work, he defended the way in which evaluative criteria were applied within the short-listing and judging process, arguing that 'the common basis of judgment is an assessment of the quality of the ideas and vision of the artist, and of the success with which these have been given physical form'.<sup>15</sup> This response may fall some way short of being a precise set of general criteria, but the formulation is highly revealing. Simon Wilson offers a

<sup>13</sup> *Guardian* 2 October, 2007

<sup>14</sup> Jones 2 October 2007

<sup>15</sup> "No Genius Required" Simon Wilson *Guardian* letters 4 October 2007

dualistic model of the artwork consisting on the one hand of 'ideas and vision' and on the other hand existing in a 'physical form'. Clearly, this model seems to him to be so obvious as to need no supporting argument, but his short phrase is packed with assumptions relating to the interpretation, evaluation and ontology of artworks. The construction of the sentence seems to imply a sequence: that the idea or vision precedes the physical form of the artwork. Arguably, it also carries the implication of a relationship between 'ideas and vision', and 'physical form' that is hierarchical as well as sequential. The centrality of 'ideas' to the formulation is significant, underlining a key theme in this study, the importance of 'meaning' in the evaluation of artworks. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the former spokesperson for an institution that has often been accused of bias towards 'conceptual' art should work from such assumptions, but the assumption that one of the reasons why we value artworks is for the 'ideas' they convey, communicate, denote or embody is a common assumption underlying the majority of published critiques of the Prize.

Wilson defends the Turner Prize jury against the charge that its evaluative judgments are not criteria based, but it is far from clear that Jones actually considers this lack of criteria to be at all problematic. Though he mocks the idea of the Turner Prize jury searching for the ineffable quality of 'genius', in a later paragraph he clearly endorses the concept, saying of the work of former prize-winner Damien Hirst displayed in the exhibition, 'Hirst's art cannot be called "good" but it can be called great... You want genius? He's a genius. To find one in 24 years is actually not bad going.'<sup>16</sup> Arguably, Jones is playing upon the inconsistencies within his own evaluative comments, partly for comic effect, but the review is also a quite explicit rejection of the need for evaluative criteria when appraising this kind of artwork.

Simon Wilson shows his impatience with this approach, concluding his letter, 'if Mr Jones is really as baffled by contemporary art as he claims to be, one wonders how he can do his job as a Guardian art critic.'<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Jones 2 October 2007

<sup>17</sup> *Guardian* letters 4 October 2007

The charge that Wilson levels against Jones is one that goes to the heart of the debate. Wilson claims that there are indeed criteria for evaluating contemporary art of this sort, and that those are the criteria that are applied by the Turner Prize jury when making their decision. If Jones is claiming to be unaware of any criteria then, in Wilson's view, he is admitting that he is unfit to do his job. The admission that his appraisals of such work are made without reference to any objective standards of excellence reduces the status of the critical evaluations he has put forward in his reviews to the level of expressions of personal taste. As far as Wilson is concerned, if Jones is not applying criteria when he makes judgements about artworks, then that undermines his credibility as a critic.

On the other hand, one might take from the exchange a quite different implication about the role and status of the critic. If evaluation of the kind of artwork produced by Hirst cannot be based on criteria, then we must trust that what the critic possesses in lieu of criteria amounts to another kind of a 'god-given genius': the special ability to perceive the 'genius' of the artists like Hirst.

It is an indication of the richness of the source materials generated by the Turner Prize that, within even this brief exchange of views, we find a treasure house of issues, not just to do with evaluation and criteria for judgments of excellence in the arts, but also with the role of the critic and the question of meaning. Despite the difficulty in proposing criteria for the evaluation of a ready-made, and all the problems attendant upon theories of evaluation that require the existence of general principles, I will not be arguing for the god-given genius of the art critic.

Though the exchange between Jones and Wilson may not qualify as any great contribution to aesthetic theory, the process of uncovering the structures of the arguments critics actually use to support their evaluative judgements casts light both on critical judgement as it is

practised and on the competing theories that offer to provide a basis for critical evaluation.

The role of the art critic is therefore at the heart of this study. In many ways both Sibley and Carroll are seeking to define the characteristics of what Hume calls the 'ideal critic'. In the reviews of the Turner Prize, we see the work of actual critics, who in this context are often required to appraise work of very different kinds, work that employs innovative approaches or is underpinned by obscure theoretical ideas. The critics must then justify their appraisals in a way that entertains and informs their readers, and produce that copy, often to meet a tight deadline. I have selected the examples of reviews of Turner Prize artists in order to examine a range of the different challenges faced by the critics and to look at the different approaches they take to producing an evaluative commentary on the work. I have also chosen to use those particular sets of critical appraisals, because they touch on topics in several different areas, so that by returning to them we can more readily knit together different threads of discussion.

Many of the works on which I have focussed have divided critical opinion, so we are able to look at reviews in which a work has been highly praised, but also examples of reviews where the same work has received harsh criticism. Amongst the latter group of reviews there are critiques so hostile to the work on show that their authors have gone as far as to deny that the work is in fact really art at all. We will look at some of those critiques in chapter two. The published attacks on particular exhibits, and on the Prize as a whole, which we will look at in that chapter will be mostly drawn from what are sometimes called "serious" papers. In the process of choosing which commentaries to use in this discussion, I have tended to bias my selection towards those publications that are likely to inform and reflect the views of the general art-going public, such as broadsheet newspapers, art review supplements, plus monthly and quarterly cultural magazines and journals. I have tended to exclude tabloid newspapers, as they tend to

use the Turner Prize only as an occasion for ridiculing the pretensions of the art-world, or as a pretext for moral panic. Although these manoeuvres are interesting from a sociological perspective, they do not provide a very useful body of source materials for a study of critical reasons.

After this initial discussion of the disputed art status of Turner Prize exhibits, the following chapters, three to six, will focus on issues concerning the evaluation of artworks by focussing on relevant topics in conjunction with sets of reviews of Turner Prize art. We take quite a circuitous path and there are some slight apparent detours, one into Victorian art criticism and one into slapstick comedy. I hope to draw together some of these different topics and themes in the final chapter seven, but it may be useful now to provide a rough map of the route.

In the third chapter, we will look at reviews of the work of the painter Tomma Abts, which provide a good opportunity to examine the ways in which critics seek to support their evaluations of the formal qualities of her paintings. The analysis of those reviews is informed by Sibley's distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic terms, and by his observation that the use of metaphor is a tool that the critic can employ in order to communicate aesthetic qualities that she has perceived in an artwork. The reviews of Abt's painting offer many examples of the use of metaphor and we will look at how that writing works within the structure of the art reviews and to what extent it offers support to their evaluative judgements.

The fourth chapter is an examination of the criteria-based approach to evaluation proposed by Noel Carroll in *On Criticism*. I look at a number of possible objections to his approach and consider it in relation to reviews of the work of the video artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen, who won the Prize in 1999. There is also consideration of Kendall Walton's alternative approach to classification, and I will refer back to the paintings of Tomma Abts in the light of Walton's ideas.

Chapter five deals with the question of to what extent, and under what circumstances the meaning of an artwork is relevant to an appraisal of its artistic quality. I will point to the importance critics place on questions of the meaning in the work of Turner Prize nominees such as artists Chris Ofili, Simon Starling and Tomoko Takahashi, and argue that the meaning of artworks is sometimes neglected in theoretical discussions about critical evaluation. I will also touch on the ideas of Susanne Langer<sup>18</sup> and Frank Sibley.<sup>19</sup> Langer's approach offers an account of meaning in music, in which it is inseparable from those elements of the work that might more usually be described as aesthetic properties. Frank Sibley's discussion of beauty offers insights into the relationship between meaning and aesthetic value. The penultimate chapter six further explores the issues of classification, interpretation and value, through a study of the commentaries on Martin Creed's Turner Prize exhibition of 2001. This exhibition presented an interesting challenge to the critics, and highlighted the issue discussed in the Wilson / Jones exchange, that of how evaluations of conceptual art can be justified and validated.

In the final chapter I will pull together some of these threads in a more extended discussion, which makes use of the examples of reviews and commentaries that have been introduced and discussed in the earlier chapters. As well as revisiting a number of the issues that are raised in those earlier discussions, I also want to make a larger point about what the reviews reveal about the Turner Prize as a whole and its role as an arena for judgements about art.

In placing discussion of theoretical ideas about the evaluation of artworks alongside evidence about the practice of criticism, as evidenced in reviews of the Turner Prize, the intention is not to judge the work of the critics against the standards set by philosophers of the arts. It is to bring together theories about critical evaluation and an analysis of critical evaluation in practice, so that

<sup>18</sup> Langer *Philosophy in a New Key*

<sup>19</sup> Sibley *Approach to Aesthetics*

those two elements can exist in dialogue with each other. In fact, one reason for doing so is that the use of published critical writing generated by the Turner Prize shortlist exhibitions provides a kind of testing ground for meta-critical theory, indeed one that parallels an important test of any theory of criteria-based critical evaluation. As Hook pointed out, one might be inclined to doubt any critical system that led to evaluative judgements that we would regard as perverse. An example might be Tolstoy's late critical principles, which led him to condemn most of world literature, including his own novels, as valueless<sup>20</sup>. I would argue that the perverse judgements that arise as a result of applying Tolstoy's criteria rightly lead us to doubt his critical theories. By the same token, we are equally entitled to doubt a meta-critical theory that leads us to condemn examples of art criticism that we would otherwise judge as good, or praise examples of art criticism that we would otherwise judge as bad.

The Turner Prize is an event that not only provides a huge pool of examples of evaluative writing; it also provides a steady stream of discussions in the media about the evaluation of artworks, the criteria used by judges, and the subjectivity or objectivity of critical judgements. On the evidence of their commentaries on the Turner Prize reviews, most critics do not take their role lightly. In many cases, their reviews provide examples of philosophical questions about the arts being explored within discussions of individual artworks.

<sup>20</sup> *What is Art?* 1896

## 2. 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*.<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> Bell, Clive *Art* 1913

The problem reveals itself in one of the examples Bell used in his discussion, William Powers Frith's<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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 work 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.<sup>24</sup> 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 argued that, if given the task of going into the warehouse to bring out all the

<sup>22</sup> Bills & Knight 2007

<sup>23</sup> *Art* 1913

<sup>24</sup> Kennick 1958

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.<sup>25</sup>

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 (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 2000, the warehouse caught fire

<sup>25</sup> Kennick p37

and many of the artworks were destroyed.<sup>26</sup> 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

<sup>26</sup> "Fire destroys Saatchi's art" *Daily Mail* 26 May 2004

Gallery 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.<sup>27</sup>

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*<sup>28</sup> 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 Cohen<sup>29</sup> took issue with Dickie, arguing that, although an artifact such as a urinal might be presented in a way that met Dickie's requirement, it might nonetheless lack the qualities that would make it a 'candidate for appreciation'. Ben Tilghman<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> Dickie 1971 p101

<sup>28</sup> OUP 1938

<sup>29</sup> Cohen Jan 1973 p69-82

<sup>30</sup> Tilghman 1984

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 not only challenge 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<sup>31</sup> 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 227: The lights going on and off*<sup>32</sup> 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 recreates a famous stunt originally used in Buster Keaton's slapstick comedy *Steamboat Bill Junior*.<sup>33</sup>

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

<sup>31</sup> See for example Rachel Campbell Johnston, 'The Turner Prize - is it art?' *Times* 1 October 2008, Lee D. and R.Cork, 'Turner Prize - is it art?' BBC News online 2 December 1999

<sup>32</sup> Turner Prize 2001

<sup>33</sup> United Artists 1928

prominent part in good art. It is in no sense visually alluring, beautiful or memorable...<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup>

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'<sup>36</sup>, while Adrian Searle, in the *Guardian*, described it as 'lyrical' and 'undeniably beautiful'<sup>37</sup>. 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

<sup>34</sup> Cork R. and D. Lee 1999

<sup>35</sup> Dickie 1988

<sup>36</sup> *Frieze*, Issue 46 May 1999

<sup>37</sup> Searle *Guardian* 1999

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.<sup>38</sup>

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'<sup>39</sup>. 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'<sup>40</sup>.

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'<sup>41</sup>, Adrian Searle in the *Guardian* describes them as 'impeccably shot and edited'<sup>42</sup>.

Clearly, to try to decide whether to include works such as *Deadpan* in this study on the basis of its 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

<sup>38</sup> Cork R. and D. Lee

<sup>39</sup> Button 2007 p156

<sup>40</sup> Stonard 2001

<sup>41</sup> Cork R. and D. Lee

<sup>42</sup> Searle *Guardian* 20 October 1999

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?<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup>

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.

<sup>43</sup> Millar M "Unmade Bed Exhibit Has London Tossing and Turning" *L.A. Times* 29 November 1999

<sup>44</sup> David Robson quoted in the *Daily Express* 2 December 1999

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.<sup>45</sup>

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 *Daily Telegraph's* art correspondent Nigel Reynolds on the winner of the 2005 Prize, Simon Starling and his installation *Shed Boat Shed*: 'Forget painting. Turner Prize is awarded to an old boatshed'.<sup>46</sup> 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 raised by the question of craft or technical skills raised by Starling's piece. Although some commentators were sceptical about the artistic status of *Shed Boat Shed*, few could deny the craft skills involved in the making of the piece.

<sup>45</sup> Weston 2004

<sup>46</sup> Reynolds, "Forget painting. Turner Prize is awarded to an old boatshed" *Daily Telegraph* 6 Dec 2005

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.<sup>47</sup>

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 Damman argues that, in the case of Simon Starling's *Shed Boat Shed*, 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.<sup>48</sup>

Damman'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.

<sup>47</sup> Godfrey 2005

<sup>48</sup> Dammann *Guardian* 8 December 2005

In many commentaries that express scepticism about 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'.<sup>49</sup> 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.'<sup>50</sup> 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 was not new; it had 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.<sup>51</sup>

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, drawing 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

<sup>49</sup> Cork R. and D. Lee

<sup>50</sup> Dorment *Daily Telegraph* 7 Dec 2010

<sup>51</sup> *Evening Standard* November 1992

denounced the institutions that (in their view) foisted it on the public. Founded in summer 1999 by painters Charles Thompson and Billy Childish, the Stuckists rejected what they call the 'conceptualist'<sup>52</sup> 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 were the Young British Artists, 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'. Charles Thompson's 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'.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

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 Thompson and Childish to Tate Director Nicholas Serota:

It should be pointed out that an everyday object eg, a bed, in its normal environment, ie, 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

<sup>52</sup>I use the term in quotation marks to indicate that I am using it as used in the Stuckist manifesto, rather than making any claim that the work referred to is conceptual art. In discussing the Stuckists, I will use the term as they do – broadly to embrace the work of artists such as Emin and McQueen.

<sup>53</sup> Thompson 1999

<sup>54</sup> Thompson & Childish 1999

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!<sup>55</sup>

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.<sup>56</sup>

Different writers may disagree on whether or not *My Bed* is art, but clearly it is not *self-evidently* art; without the contextualization 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 call 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.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Thompson and Childish, *Open Letter to Nicholas Serota* 22 February 2000

<sup>56</sup> Sutherland 1999

<sup>57</sup> Childish & Thomson 1 September 2000

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 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'<sup>58</sup>.

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 three years later he was regularly attacked or ridiculed in the press. His exhibition features 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.<sup>59</sup>

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*

<sup>58</sup> Bill Moulard "A disaster in plaster" *Daily Mail* 24 November 1993 p 7

<sup>59</sup> *Independent* Friday 14 July 1995

*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.<sup>60</sup>

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 for 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.<sup>61</sup>

Skepticism 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.<sup>62</sup>

It might be worth at this point summarizing 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

<sup>60</sup> O'hear 1995

<sup>61</sup> O'hear 1995

<sup>62</sup> Spalding 2012

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 also have 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'.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Lee *Artforum* September 1999 p48

<sup>64</sup> Barnes, *Guardian* 21 July 1993

As Rachel Barnes suggests, Hannah Collins's 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'.<sup>65</sup> 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 Collins's 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, Maev Kennedy reported on a Stuckist protest for the Guardian:

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 Thompson, a painter.<sup>66</sup>

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 validatory power.

One 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

<sup>65</sup> Button 2007

<sup>66</sup> *Guardian* 29 November 2000

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.<sup>67</sup>

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.<sup>68</sup>

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.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Jones December 2014

<sup>68</sup> O'Hagan December 2014

<sup>69</sup> O'Hagan December 2014

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.<sup>70</sup>

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 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.<sup>71</sup>

Dorment had not changed his view when Philipsz was announced as the winner two months later. However, although the sub-editor’s headline suggests a wholesale rejection of sound art as a medium, in truth Dorment 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.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Sooke 2010

<sup>71</sup> Dorment 4 Oct 2010

<sup>72</sup> Dorment 7 Dec 2010

Although Dorment is forthright in his evaluation of Philipsz' work, when it comes to the medium there is a real confusion, one that is exacerbated by the sub-editors choice of headline. Dorment 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, Dorment's acceptance of sound art as a valid medium is not straightforward or uncomplicated.

One other possible reason for 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'.<sup>73</sup> 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*. *The 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*.<sup>74</sup>

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, offers 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

<sup>73</sup> 'Gay porn photographer snaps up Turner' Prize *Daily Telegraph* 29 Nov 2000

<sup>74</sup> Collings November 2000

contexts, notably photojournalism, fashion photography and digital simulation.<sup>75</sup>

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 addresses 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", ie, 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.<sup>76</sup>

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,

<sup>75</sup> Charlesworth 2001

<sup>76</sup> Burgoyne 2000

arguing that it is the 'personal non-commissioned' 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 subcategory.

As Burgoyne points out, the line between commercial and fine art is not a clearly drawn one and perhaps it has never 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 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.<sup>77</sup> 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 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

<sup>77</sup> Dan Glaister 'Saatchi agency stole my idea', *Guardian*, 2 March 1999

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.<sup>78</sup>

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.<sup>79</sup>

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

<sup>78</sup> Cork R. and D. Lee

<sup>79</sup> *New Criterion* Dec 1999 Vol 18 Issue 4 p3

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 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<sup>80</sup>, whose title 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.<sup>81</sup>

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.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> John Fowles 1974

<sup>81</sup> Spalding "It stinks" *Daily Mail* 9 April 2012

<sup>82</sup> "Who's that sniggering at the back?" *Observer* 21 October 2007

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 Emperors' 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 reappointed 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.<sup>83</sup>

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 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 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

<sup>83</sup> Akbar, Arifa "Serota gets a job for life at the Tate – but how come No 10 wasn't told?" *Independent* 16 August 2008

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.<sup>84</sup>

Massow emphasizes 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".<sup>85</sup>

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 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*,<sup>86</sup> Julian Spalding, like Massow, points to the investment art institutions 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

<sup>84</sup> Massow 2002

<sup>85</sup> Massow 2002

<sup>86</sup> Spalding 2012

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.'<sup>87</sup>

Barber clearly felt herself to be the outsider in a group of jurors (chaired by Nicholas Serota) whose other member were gallery directors Margot Heller and Matthew Higgs, and the Director of Curating at Goldsmiths College,

<sup>87</sup> Barber October 2006

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.<sup>88</sup>

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.<sup>89</sup>

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

<sup>88</sup> Barber October 2006

<sup>89</sup> Barber December 2006

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.<sup>90</sup>

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.<sup>91</sup>

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 Thompson called her paintings "silly little meaningless diagrams that make 1950s wallpaper look profound"<sup>92</sup>) 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."<sup>93</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Barber October 2006

<sup>91</sup> Barber October 2006

<sup>92</sup> *Guardian*, 5 December 2006

<sup>93</sup> Thornton p101

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!"<sup>94</sup>

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.'<sup>95</sup> Clearly, Serota's comment can be seen as being characterized 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.<sup>96</sup>

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

<sup>94</sup> Thornton p101

<sup>95</sup> Collings "'You've Been Framed'", *Guardian*, 18 October 2008

<sup>96</sup> Barber October 2006

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.”<sup>97</sup>

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’<sup>98</sup>, 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.<sup>99</sup>

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.’<sup>100</sup>

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 short-listing and selection process, her

<sup>97</sup> Thornton

<sup>98</sup> Barber *Daily Telegraph* 1 November 2008

<sup>99</sup> Thornton v Telegraph Media Group. High Court Of Justice Queen's Bench Division, 26 July 2011

<sup>100</sup> Barber 10 December 2006

account clearly falls short of providing evidence of a 'fix' and Barber clearly disavows the implication that arose from her own use of the word.

Julian Stallabrass<sup>101</sup> has written about the Brit-art scene and documented the promotion of artists through sophisticated public relations, 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 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 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 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.

<sup>101</sup> Stallabrass 1999

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 scrutinize 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.’<sup>102</sup>

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 artists’ *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.<sup>103</sup>

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

<sup>102</sup> Danto in Carroll(ed) 2000

<sup>103</sup> Dickie April 2000

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.<sup>104</sup>

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 judgements 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 judgements of what is art and what is not.

<sup>104</sup> Stallabrass p188

### 3. Tomma Abts: Form and Value.

This chapter looks at the way critics write about art and the ways in which their descriptions of the work that they are reviewing are used to convey the aesthetic qualities they see within it. In particular, it examines the question of how the critic goes about making and justifying aesthetic judgements about the formal qualities of artworks. We will consider these issues by considering critical and curatorial commentaries on the paintings of Tomma Abts, who won the Turner Prize in 2006.

When the Prize was awarded to Tomma Abts, there was much press comment about her work standing in marked contrast to the artistic tendencies of the Young British Artists who had received so much exposure in the Turner Prize coverage in the preceding years:

After years of unmade beds, pickled sheep and lightbulbs that switch on and off, Britain's most prestigious art prize was won last night by the most unlikely kind of artist – a painter ... Her win comes amid talk of a return to painting in the art world.<sup>105</sup>

Many commentators welcomed the fact that Tomma Abts worked in the traditional medium of painting. Rachel Campbell-Johnson speculated that even the Prize's sternest critics might be pleased:

Maybe even the Stuckists — that disconsolate band of cultural activists who faithfully turn out annually to harangue Turner Prize partygoers — might be appeased if she wins<sup>106</sup>

The Stuckist leader Charles Thompson was not appeased, describing Abts's paintings as, "silly little meaningless diagrams"<sup>107</sup>. His dismissive comparison of Abts' work to wallpaper serves to underline an important aspect of her work: that it is non-figurative. Her work is often described as abstract painting, although as we shall see, some critics questioned that label.

<sup>105</sup> Cornell, Tim *The Scotsman* December 2006

<sup>106</sup> *Times* 3 October 2006

<sup>107</sup> *Guardian* 5 December 2006

In this section I will examine in some detail the language and structure of reviews of Tomma Abts' 2006 Turner Prize exhibition and also of the immediately preceding exhibition for which she was nominated. I have chosen to focus on Abts for reasons precisely the opposite of those that guided my choice of examples in the previous chapter. Many of the works looked at in the last chapter were difficult cases: cases in which art status is denied by some commentators; cases which might be expected to confound critics who wished to judge the work on the grounds of aesthetics, or at least on the grounds of aesthetics alone; art composed of found objects; objects that repel or disgust; and objects that need to be explained. Many of the pieces we have examined so far are works in which the formal characteristics are deliberately impoverished or are deemed not to be central to the work, but merely a means of conveying the idea or concept of the artist or generating concepts in the minds of the viewers. In Abts' work by contrast, the formal features of the work, colour, form, line, texture and so on, seem to be intended to stand on their own, to be appreciated as things in themselves rather than referring to a subject outside the frame of the painting.

As a non-figurative painter whose work has no obvious or easily definable subject matter, Abts provides an opportunity to look at the way in which reviews of her work make that connection between the formal properties of the paintings and aesthetic qualities they ascribe to the work. In this section, I examine the ways in which critics seek to persuade us of their aesthetic judgements (and to support and justify those judgements) through analysis of reviews of Tomma Abts by Adrian Searle in the *Guardian*, Matthew Collings and Barry Schwabsky in *Modern Painters*, Craig Burnett in *Art Review* and Rachel Campbell-Johnson in the *Times*.

### *Non-aesthetic Description*

In 'Aesthetic Concepts', Frank Sibley discusses the different kinds of words that are used to describe artworks and distinguishes between aesthetic and non-aesthetic terminology. A critic might say, for example, 'that a painting uses pale colours, predominantly blues and greens, and has kneeling figures

in the foreground'<sup>108</sup>, all of which are features that can be ascertained without the exercise of aesthetic judgement. Matthew Collings covers this non-aesthetic description in the opening paragraph of his review in *Modern Painters*:

Her canvases are small, the forms simple, the colour muted and the lines clear and sharp. In interviews she says her method is to start with bright acrylic colours, gradually they get toned down and the medium changes to oil.<sup>109</sup>

He goes on to list the kinds of forms that occur in her paintings:

Organic forms, geometric forms, straight lines, curved lines, relationships of colour, relationships between the forms and the outer edge of the canvas...<sup>110</sup>

As Sibley pointed out, the presence of the kind of forms Collings describes would be apparent to anyone who had normal vision and was of average intelligence. On the other hand, words such *unified, graceful, delicate, lifeless, serene, trite* or *tragic*, Sibley characterises as aesthetic concepts. They are properties that can be discerned only through the exercise of aesthetic judgement.

Although clearly these aesthetic properties are dependent on the non-aesthetic formal properties, that dependency is not, argues Sibley, rule-governed:

There are no sufficient conditions, no non-aesthetic features such that the presence of some set or number of them will beyond question justify or warrant the application of an aesthetic term.... Things may be described to us in non-aesthetic terms as fully as we please but we are not thereby put in the position of having to admit (or being unable to deny) that they are delicate or graceful or garish or exquisitely balanced.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Sibley *Aesthetic Concepts* p1

<sup>109</sup> Collings 2006

<sup>110</sup> Collings 2006

<sup>111</sup> Sibley *Aesthetic Concepts*

There have been challenges to this view, including one from Carroll which will be discussed later, but if we accept (for the moment) that this is so, then it raises a question as to what extent an art review can be said to be a contribution to a reasoned discourse. If there is no necessary connection between the non-aesthetic properties that the critic describes within a painting and the aesthetic qualities she ascribes to that painting, then she is vulnerable to the accusation that she is merely asserting a personal subjective opinion. Sibley identifies the problem:

Now the critic's talk, it is clear, frequently consists in mentioning or pointing out the features, including easily discernible non-aesthetic ones, upon which the aesthetic qualities depend. But the puzzling question remains how, by mentioning these features, the critic is thereby justifying or supporting his judgements.<sup>112</sup>

Sibley is clear that there is no necessary connection between any particular form or colour mentioned by a reviewer and any aesthetic quality she might decide it possesses. Aesthetic qualities are emergent qualities that arise out of those particular forms and colours within the particular artwork, but no individual formal feature carries the necessary implication of a corresponding aesthetic quality.

Sibley does not see the critic as one who presents a reasoned analysis in order to prove the truth of the evaluations she has made. Rather he casts the critic as one especially skilled in perceiving the aesthetic qualities in art, and as a teacher and persuader, who through a variety of methods enables the viewer to perceive those aesthetic qualities. In the absence of a necessary connection, the critic's role is to expose the particular aesthetic qualities of each individual artwork by drawing the viewers' attention to them through gesture, analysis, metaphor or even rhetoric, so that the viewers are moved to see those qualities for themselves. The critic can call attention to the non-aesthetic properties that contribute to the aesthetic qualities she perceives (for example, 'the muted colours create a sombre mood') while being aware that in a different painting the same muted colours might have an altogether different

<sup>112</sup> Sibley Aesthetic Concepts p15

effect. By looking at the reviews of Abts, we can start to address the question posed by Sibley, of how in practice the critics justify and support their appraisals of her work.

In each of the reviews, the critic provides description of the work, formal and contextual analysis and an evaluation. There are similarities of structure amongst all the reviews and I have grouped the elements under different headings: *non-aesthetic description*, *categorisation*, *metaphoric description*, *characterisation*, and *direct aesthetic judgement*. It is important to note here that, in grouping sections of these reviews under these particular headings, my approach has been guided by the structure of this particular set of reviews, rather than the application of a prior set of categories. This approach assists in seeing, not only what is being reported, argued or asserted within the reviews, but how these statements are constructed.

It would be a relatively easy task to map instead the reviews against the 'parts of criticism' identified by Noel Carroll: description, classification, contextualization, elucidation, interpretation, analysis, and evaluation.<sup>113</sup>

These are undoubtedly useful headings that can be applied to reviews across the board. However, in examining the reviews, it is useful to take, as a starting point, the structure of critical discourse as it actually occurs within the specific texts. The headings I have chosen reflect the interests of the critics and their responses to Abts' work, and to some extent the difficulty of classifying language in which Carroll's 'parts of criticism' are so intertwined.

Carroll identifies 'description' as one of his parts of criticism and it is one that, while it is an essential feature of any visual arts review, is sometimes dealt with only briefly. In the reviews of Tomma Abts' paintings however, many critics devote much of their reviews to descriptive writing, in one form or another. In looking at the way description is handled within the reviews, it is useful to separate it into the sub-groups *non-aesthetic* and *metaphoric*. The first sub-group *non-aesthetic description* is exactly as Sibley defined it, simple

<sup>113</sup> Carroll p84

description of physical form requiring no aesthetic judgement. The (larger) second sub-group reflects the frequent inseparability of description from elements of evaluative and interpretive writing.

Elements of the reviews that would fall under Carroll's headings 'classification' and 'contextualization' would be found under my heading *categorisation*. There is a reason why I am avoiding using Carroll's heading 'classification'. In *On Criticism*, Carroll argues for a reason-based approach to evaluation that has classification at its heart. The term he frequently uses to discuss classification is the word 'genre'. The term is one that he uses quite loosely, sometimes referring to subsets of the arts that have highly codified conventions, such as the horror movie or detective novel, sometimes using it to refer to an artistic movement or style. There are some difficulties attached to Carroll's concept of genre that will be discussed in a later chapter. In contrasting Carroll's 'genre' with Kendall Walton's<sup>114</sup> concept of artistic 'category', I will be using the neutral term *classification* and so will avoid using the term here. I will not however avoid using the term 'genre' and I will use it in a loose way, as Carroll does. That which Carroll identifies as 'elucidation' and 'analysis' can largely be found, in some form, in these reviews: in the sections I have called *metaphoric description* and *characterisation*.

One of Carroll's parts of criticism that I have not included in my list of headings for this set of reviews is 'interpretation'. Although interpretation is an important (and often the largest in terms of wordage) element of the overwhelming majority of sets of Turner Prize reviews, it does not feature strongly as a discrete category within the critical writing on Abts' work, and, in that respect, the reviews are untypical. However that is not to say that interpretation is a part of criticism that is ignored by the critics in this case. It is rather that questions about the meaning of Abts' work are dealt with less directly. The critics do talk about the significance of Abts' paintings but the subject is explored in a different, less explicit kind of discussion within the reviews, a point I will return to later.

<sup>114</sup> 'Categories of Art' 1970

One reason why it is particularly interesting to look at the reviews of Abts is that, without any obvious pictorial element or clear subject matter or message to the work, critical focus is inevitably on the formal properties and aesthetic qualities of the work. In reviewing Abts' non-figurative paintings, only one of the reviewers, Searle, tackled interpretation explicitly, and then only to apparently concede defeat:

Being comprehensible isn't everything. Art is not always there to be understood. Who knows ... what, exactly, Tomma Abts means by what she paints?<sup>115</sup>

Searle does not supply a direct answer to his own question, but he does suggest that the answer lies in the visual allusions within her work, and perhaps also in the way in which the viewer engages with the painting:

What is Abts painting, and what do her paintings allude to? Each is an event on a plane. You don't look at Abts's paintings, so much as observe them.<sup>116</sup>

It is when Searle describes the forms within the paintings that he gives expression to the visual allusions he sees in the work. For that reason, in Searle's writing, much of what I have called *metaphoric description* and *characterisation* can also be considered interpretive in nature, and that arguably holds true in case of most of the other reviewers as well. I will return to the question of how the critics interpret the paintings of Tomma Abts in chapter five, when we look at Susanne Langer's concept of symbolic transformation.

Carroll's final 'part of criticism' is evaluation, that element whose role in critical practice Carroll is keen to defend in *On Criticism*. In discussing the evaluation of Abts' paintings, I make a distinction between overall critical verdicts and the finer grained aesthetic evaluations that contribute to them. The latter I refer to as *direct aesthetic judgements*. The former: the overall verdicts on a piece, an exhibition, or an artist, are also present in most reviews. In reviews of

<sup>115</sup> Searle 3 October 2006

<sup>116</sup> Searle 3 October 2006

Turner Prize nominees, there is an understandable pressure on the critic to make comparative evaluations; their readers and surely their editors want them to pick a winner and to give reasons for their choice. In their shortlist reviews, Campbell Johnson and Searle satisfied that demand. Searle's review ends, 'Abts' quiet and disturbing paintings seem utterly right and unexpected. They ought to win.' Campbell Johnson also endorses Abts, but less enthusiastically. In her review of the shortlist exhibition she emphasises that her overall verdict is based on her direct aesthetic judgements about the formal qualities of the paintings, rather than on any external factor:

I hope that Abts takes the Turner Prize this year. This is not because, in a cultural climate that persistently trumpets the return of painting, it might seem appropriate to recognise it. It is because her paintings have a lovely sense of inner congruence.<sup>117</sup>

However when Abts was announced as the winner a few months later, although Campbell-Johnson duly approved the jury's choice, she made it clear that she felt that Abts was the best choice in a poor field:

Tomma Abts was the right choice of winner for this year's prize. Her obsessive little canvasses with their zig-zaggy geometries address the problems of painting in a post-abstract world. The only real problem is that there is a real problem. Painting it would seem has become interminably dull...The judges would have made a stronger statement if they had declared that they were not going to award the prize; that there was nothing new that merited attention.<sup>118</sup>

Clearly, for many commentators, Tomma Abts' nomination for the Turner Prize had a significance that went beyond an appraisal of the individual artist, providing a platform for critics to make comments on the state of painting as a whole. However, it is on the finer grained aesthetic judgements of the particular features of the individual artworks that I intend to focus, rather than these overall verdicts, which merely summarise the discussion of the artwork that makes up the body of the reviews.

<sup>117</sup> Campbell-Johnson 3 October 2006

<sup>118</sup> Campbell-Johnson 2 December 2006

Sibley lists several methods used by critics, the first of which is to 'simply mention or point out non-aesthetic features'<sup>119</sup>. All the reviews give descriptions of non-aesthetic properties of the paintings; we have seen Matthew Collings cover these aspects and, in Collings' review, the non-aesthetic properties of Abts' work are stated baldly without the use of expressive adjectives or metaphoric language. However, in other reviews, the non-aesthetic elements are entangled with evaluative language and accounts of the effects these non-aesthetic properties have on the viewer. This kind of writing I have grouped under the heading of *metaphorical description*. Searle, Schwabsky, Burnett and Campbell-Johnson all appraise Abts' work positively (Campbell-Johnson grudgingly so). Collings is the only reviewer whose appraisal of Abts is almost entirely negative and his description of her work tends to eschew metaphor and employ non-aesthetic terminology.

### *Categorisation*

The genre of Tomma Abts' paintings is discussed by all the critics by reference to abstract art, although reviewers have different views about the nature of the relationship between her paintings and the genre. Craig Burnett, in *Art Review*, points out that, although the paintings are abstract in the sense of not depicting any object, they differ from examples of early 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction in that they have not emerged from a process moving from figuration to abstraction; abstract art is their starting point:

At first glance, these are abstract paintings, though her work seems to elude, or transcend, the category. Not surprisingly, many bring to mind late Cubism. Picasso and Braque, of course, stretched figuration to its limit; Abts, on the other hand, seems to be taking abstraction to the brink of figuration.<sup>120</sup>

Several critics point out this difference between Abts' approach and the approach of artists such as Picasso and Braque: that, in a sense, the trajectory of her process moves in the opposite direction to that of modernist abstraction. Rachel Campbell-Johnston makes a similar point, arguing that

<sup>119</sup> Sibley 2006 p18

<sup>120</sup> Burnett 2005

Abts' pictures 'are not abstract because they are based on nothing in the real world.'<sup>121</sup>

Adrian Searle also sees the relationship between Abts' paintings and the traditions of modernist painting as far from clear-cut. For him, the complex nature of that relationship to the abstract art of the mid twentieth century is a positive feature of the work:

Abts' paintings are somehow being produced at the wrong time, and belong to an alternative parallel history of modernism. She has spoken of wanting to make paintings that belong in the future. People talk about experiencing art in the here and now: hers exists at a tangent to the present, in an unspecifiable there and then. This, in part, is what is so good about them.<sup>122</sup>

Several reviewers prefer to speak of the work not primarily as abstract art, but rather as paintings that refer to abstract art. Schwabsky writes, 'it's not surprising that Abts' delicate, various and rather subdued paintings are easily and frequently viewed as a rueful commentary on the medium's contemporary marginality by way of a canny archaeology of the historically adrift'.

Schwabsky's discussion of the paintings locates their contextual frame of reference to a particular historical moment within modernist painting:

The paintings of Tomma Abts are dense with allusions to the history of abstraction. One senses, as one looks at these works, that they convey a particular redolence of the 1930s and early 40s, a time in which abstract art was subject to profound uncertainty....

He cites some less well-known abstract painters of that period, Jean Hélion, Auguste Herbin, Willi Baumeister and Rolph Scarlett, who he refers to as 'artists whose reputations hover in a strange twilight somewhere just beneath the notice of the art history textbooks'. However, he concludes that there is more to Abts' work than embodying a set of references to a particular art-historical category of art:

<sup>121</sup> Campbell-Johnston 3 October 2006

<sup>122</sup> Searle 3 October 2006

..the more time I spend with her paintings the more I realize that to look at them for what they say about the history of abstract style -- one might say, of abstraction as style -- is, not exactly wrong, but too narrow and too scholastic.<sup>123</sup>

Collings locates Abts' work in very much the same context, but where Schwabsky sees the reclaiming of a neglected artistic tradition, Collings uses unflattering language to make the reference:

Abts does abstract paintings. She's currently getting a lot of attention. The work looks quite good in reproduction. It refers to B-division abstraction from the time when Modernism was hot. ...<sup>124</sup>

Unlike Schwabsky, Collings sees Abts' paintings as being in what he calls an 'ironic relationship' with modernist abstraction. Both Schwabsky and Collings speak positively about the idea of painting drawing inspiration from this period, but Collings sees the work as representing a post-modernist appropriation of modernist abstraction. In his view, the paintings do not honour the tradition to which they refer:

It's foolish to think that in Abts's case obscure moments of modernist abstraction are being genuinely rehabilitated, having been out in the cold. It's more that they're being satirized, the temperature turned down even further, in what seems to be a heartless exercise in chic.<sup>125</sup>

Collings here seems to echo the views expressed in the Stuckist open letter to Nicholas Serota six years earlier:

Post Modernism, our 'official avant-garde' is a cool, slick marketing machine where the cleverness and cynicism of an art which is about nothing but itself, eviscerates emotion, content and belief.<sup>126</sup>

There is a clear space for debate here about how Abts' work relates to modernist abstraction. Several points are at issue; there is the question of

<sup>123</sup> Schwabsky 2005

<sup>124</sup> Collings 2006

<sup>125</sup> Collings 2006

<sup>126</sup> Thompson, Childish 2000

which specific practitioners Abts work relates to, but there is also room for debate about the significance of those practitioners within the modernist tradition. Discussion of genre also serves to highlight differences and similarities between the processes used by Abts in the creation of her work, and the processes that characterise the tradition to which they make reference. It also serves to provide a basis for a discussion, within the context of modernist theory and the nature of abstraction as a genre, of the artistic intentions behind Abts' paintings.

Although, within these reviews, the critics offer some evidence in support of their assertions with respect to genre, they also make many unsupported statements, simply identifying Abts as being in a certain relationship with modernist abstraction. However, this should not be surprising given the purpose of an art review, the need to appeal to the general reader and the practical restrictions on column inches. Inevitably the critics are aware of the pressure to make their judgements and move on, rather than showing their workings in any detail.

However although the reviews do contain unsupported statements, that is not to say that a more rigorous investigation of these questions of classification could not be undertaken. Indeed, these are the kind of issues that are frequently debated by academic art historians, who underpin their conclusions with evidence gained from contextual research and from detailed analysis of the works themselves. Questions relating to classification are clearly relevant to Collings' appraisal of Abts' work; he sees it as coldly satirising the tradition of modernist abstract painting. Reasoned debate based on evidence might tend to confirm (or alternatively, refute) that analysis, and therefore affect any appraisal that was made on that premise.

### *Metaphoric Description*

I use the term *metaphoric description* to identify those sections of the reviews where the description of the formal features of the artwork is not simply factual reporting, but coloured by the use of expressive adjectives, similes, metaphor;

one might say, by the use of poetic language. In the reviews by critics whose appraisal of Abts' work is positive, the descriptions of the formal characteristics of her painting are shot through with metaphor. Sibley identifies this as a device intended to bring the reader to an awareness of the aesthetic qualities the critic sees in the work, and to thereby help enable the reader to perceive those qualities himself.

Searle's review begins with non-aesthetic terminology but moves quickly into a language that describes effect:

Abts shows 11 paintings here, all identically sized, all completed in the past six years. Each presents something like a spatial conundrum, with impossible perspectives and folds, inconsistent shadows and highlights, baffling geometries and unreadable progressions.<sup>127</sup>

Searle is describing the forms within the painting, but with his choice of adjectives – *impossible*, *inconsistent*, *baffling* – he is also attempting to convey his thoughts when trying to read those forms. From there he moves to metaphorical description:

... Each is a foreign country, bounded by a vertically orientated 48x38cm canvas. Sometimes the surface is marked with canals or walls, or has the appearance of scored and folded papers, struggling to achieve three dimensions. Some are reminiscent of the kinds of swirls one can only ever see in polarised light, their outlines as frozen as metal inlay in enamel.<sup>128</sup>

Here the use of similes makes the description more vivid, expressing the sensory impressions provoked by the marks on canvas. As the description continues, the use of metaphor becomes more explicit, as Searle seems to imply that it is, in part, the ability of the paintings to provoke such metaphoric associations in the mind of the viewer that evidences the aesthetic quality of the work:

Other paintings depict a kind of imaginary space - inside the drawer

<sup>127</sup> Searle 3 October 2006

<sup>128</sup> Searle 3 October 2006

of an old desk, the folds of a patterned handkerchief in a pocket. One thinks of wooden marquetry, of crumpled cellophane, of targets, unknown semaphores and flags.<sup>129</sup>

Searle's language again underlines the ambiguity of the term abstract in relation to the paintings of Tomma Abts. Campbell-Johnson argues that they are not abstract, as they are not based on anything in the real world. Searle writes about the painting depicting imaginary spaces, which brings the paintings back from being simply paintings; they are also pictures, albeit picturing worlds that exist only in the imagination of the viewer.

Burnett's review combines visual allusion with a description of the 'mood' of the painting, but also a physical metaphor suggesting a mode of involvement when viewing the work:

Zeyn (2004) has a richly claustrophobic mood, with slabs of swampy green applied in thick layers over multiple pentimenti. Looking at the planes and shadows, you feel like you could climb beneath the painting's sharp edges.<sup>130</sup>

Burnett draws attention to the way in which Abts uses colour, in ways that create the effect of shadows, so giving the surface of her painting the suggestion of a third dimension. However, Collings does not approve of this aspect of Abts' painting and is dismissive of those who are impressed by the technique:

Abts offers a crude graphic illusionism where you get the effect of a solid object casting a shadow; this kind of thing often appeals to people who are not particularly interested in art or who don't know much about it.<sup>131</sup>

Schwabsky, on the other hand, writes of the use of shadowed forms as a positive feature of the paintings, precisely because the technique distances her from the tradition of twentieth century abstract painting and the critical

<sup>129</sup> Searle 3 October 2006

<sup>130</sup> Burnett 2005

<sup>131</sup> Collings 2006

ideas that surrounded them. He makes specific reference to Clement Greenberg, whose 1955 essay *American-Type Painting* made the case for an approach to painting that embraced the flatness of the picture surface and eschewed the use of techniques that create an illusion of pictorial depth. Again underlining what he sees as the complexity of Abts' relationship with the tradition of abstract painting, he admires the way in which, 'depicted shadows violate the tenets of the modernism with which the paintings might otherwise seem to keep faith.'<sup>132</sup> He also draws attention to the way in which the sharp edges within the Abts' paintings act as evidence of the process of making the work. His use of simile likens the painting to a garment or a living body:

The slight ridges left by painted-over hard-edged forms function as something like seams or scars, signs of possibly arbitrary or incomplete joins in the deep structure of the painting.<sup>133</sup>

What I have called metaphoric description is an element of art criticism that presents an easy target for parody and ridicule. It does not contain statements that we could describe as a critical reason. There is no attempt to claim that because the artwork contains feature X it must therefore possess quality Y. The writers use poetic imagery to express their responses to the work, not to identify causal factors. For Sibley, this kind of writing legitimately serves the function of directing readers to significant features of the work, so that they may see those qualities for themselves. However, the poetic use of language and the dramatisation of subjective impressions could be seen as strategies to conceal the lack of structured argument within the appraisal. Criticism of this kind is often made from outside the art world; in this case the criticism is voiced within the reviews themselves, as we will see later in this section.

### *Characterisation*

One way in which critics talk about artworks is to characterise them, that is, to describe them in the ways we talk about people. Sibley talks about everyday

<sup>132</sup> Schwabsky

<sup>133</sup> Schwabsky

words being 'pressed into service' as aesthetic terms, initially as metaphors then, over time, being co-opted into critical language; the characterisation of the paintings is one of the ways in which the reviews of Abts do this. Lynn Barber provided an example of this kind of characterisation when, writing of her experiences as a Turner judge, she recalled initially regarding Abts' work as 'Anita Brookner-ish'.<sup>134</sup>

There is general agreement amongst the critics in characterising the paintings in terms of a quality which I will refer to with a neutral term *reticence*. However, they take different views about whether this quality of reticence is a good thing. For Searle, the reticence of the work is clearly a positive feature:

Why are these paintings so memorable? I think it is because of their evident conviction, the restraint and reserve with which each is delivered.

... Every painting is unmistakably by its author, each quite unlike its neighbour. The world Abts depicts is utterly consistent, even with all its anomalies and flaws.<sup>135</sup>

Schwabsky talks about 'the formal self-containment of the paintings' and quotes with approval a catalogue essay describing how 'the paintings curl inwards, an in-growth rather than an open appearance.'<sup>136</sup> Burnett describes one brightly coloured painting in the exhibition 'an extrovert among introverts'<sup>137</sup>

Rachel Campbell-Johnston agreed with the notion that this art is introverted in character, but she does not see it as a positive feature of the work, which she describes as 'timid' and 'obsessive'. When the shortlist was announced, she called Abts' paintings:

<sup>134</sup> Barber October 2006

<sup>135</sup> Searle October 2006

<sup>136</sup> Schwabsky

<sup>137</sup> Burnett

hermetic little abstractions which despite her admirable independence and manifest dedication, work at an interface so specialist that only the artistic anorak can relate.<sup>138</sup>

The words 'hermetic' and 'anorak' recur in her review of the shortlist exhibition<sup>139</sup> and again in the article she published when Abts was announced as the winner<sup>140</sup>.

Collings however characterises this reticence not as reserve or even timidity but as coldness:

The overall effect was of a deliberate blankness. The emotional response could only be disappointment, I thought, unless you weren't really interested in the qualities that Abts's paintings at first appear to be about. When I look through articles about Abts's work, this characteristic blankness is either denied or else it is presumed to be something like a contemporary-art version of the expressive, morally loaded blankness for which Beckett's plays and novels are celebrated. In other words, blankness is presented as cleverness. In Beckett language is rich. His use of words is electric. There is nothing corresponding to that in Abts.<sup>141</sup>

The overall effect that Collings describes differs from those described by the other reviewers, but like them he supports his argument with reference to his own direct aesthetic judgements of formal elements of the paintings.

#### *Direct Aesthetic Judgement*

Although possessing many formal similarities to the great works of modernist painting, Collings argues, the work of Abts lacks the kind of aesthetic qualities that he sees in the work of Matisse, Picasso and Pollock. His evaluation is based on his own direct aesthetic judgement on the formal qualities of the paintings:

A painting from the past or the present might have muted colour, but there's definitely a feeling for the way colour works -- you get a

<sup>138</sup> Campbell-Johnston 17 May 2006

<sup>139</sup> Campbell-Johnston 3 October 2006

<sup>140</sup> Campbell-Johnston 5 December 2006

<sup>141</sup> Collings 2006

colour blast. The painting might be very strongly linear, but there is a genuine feel for line. Here, instead, the muted colour was muddy and the lines were lifeless.<sup>142</sup>

Where Collings describes the colours in the paintings as muddy, Burnett by contrast, describes in positive terms the effects that Abts produces with 'chocolate', 'varying shades of pale brown' and 'swampy green'.

Andrew Searle is not in agreement with Collings about the use of line in the paintings. He singles out one painting in particular in which use of line is a dominant feature:

Heeso, from 2004, consists of a single continuous red line that meanders, coils and uncoils from corner to corner, forming a bounded shape that is all but impossible to read. The line never loses its sinuousness or surprise and agility, feeling its way from corner to corner and side to side of the small canvas. There's almost nothing to it. And there's everything to it.<sup>143</sup>

As Sibley points out, to use a word such as 'life' or 'movement' when talking about a painting is to employ a metaphor, albeit one that has faded to the point where we feel that it is quite natural to use it in a description of a static inanimate object. Searle writes about a line that 'meanders, coils and uncoils', he writes of its 'agility' and describes it as 'feeling its way'.

Burnett also writes about the movement he sees in the painting, describing the way that 'bumps rise, places shimmer, shadows loom and forms come to life'. He describes one painting as looking 'like a dance of lightning over chocolate. Jagged ribbons seem to rise from the canvas...' In a description of another painting, he says, 'the bottom-most, thinnest layer of paint seems to rise to the top of the picture plane, as if the canvas itself were pushing beyond the surface of the painting.' Summing up her work at the end of the review he writes:

<sup>142</sup> Collings 2006

<sup>143</sup> Searle 2006

Abts is at her best when the unlikely colours and overlapping forms come to life, like the gooey, molten world that appears when you close your eyes.<sup>144</sup>

As we have seen, Rachel Campbell-Johnson is less enthusiastic in her appraisal of the paintings but she nonetheless agrees with Searle, Schwabsky and Burnett that 'they trap an unsettling sense of movement'<sup>145</sup>.

Those critics who see movement in Abts' work note it as a positive feature; Collings, who does not, criticises her paintings as 'deliberately inert', with lines that are 'lifeless'. It is notable that, although the critics differ in their views of the presence or otherwise of life and movement in Abts' work, there seems to be a consensus that life and movement are (or would be) what Carroll calls 'good-making' features with respect to these particular paintings. 'Life' and 'movement' in this context represent positively valenced terms, words that denote qualities that we would expect to be 'good-making' features of a work.

As Sibley points out, the fact that we consider it fit to apply a positively valenced term to an artwork does not guarantee that it is a good artwork, but its application is unlikely to indicate a demerit in the work. So, we might say that an abstract painting is good because it contains life and movement. We might also say that an abstract artwork is poor, *despite* having life and movement. However we would be unlikely to say that an abstract artwork is poor *because* it has life and movement. It is possible this formulation might be used for rhetorical effect, but it would require further explanation in order for it to make sense.

There are examples of this kind of language within the reviews of Tomma Abts, underlining the reversibility of these negatively or positively valenced terms. Most reviews describe the paintings as having colours that are muted. Collings uses the negatively valenced term 'muddy'. However Schwabsky uses the similarly negative sounding term 'murky', but does so in the context of a positive appraisal:

<sup>144</sup> Burnett

<sup>145</sup> Campbell Johnson 3 October 2006

one sometimes sees through to anterior strata of paint, so that one notes, for instance, how the first layers are typically brighter and leaner -- more stainlike -- than the typically murky hues and fat consistency of the last coats of colour. One always feels both that the painting might have been something else entirely, and yet that the final result is somehow self-contained.<sup>146</sup>

As Sibley noted, 'there are no sure-fire mechanical rules or procedures for deciding which qualities are actual defects in the work; one has to judge for oneself'<sup>147</sup>.

### *The Language of Art Criticism*

The metaphoric descriptions that occur in the reviews represent examples of current modes of critical language employed by both critics and curators. It is a category of writing that is often parodied and is easy to lampoon. However, within the reviews we can see that the use of such metaphor laden language functions as a pragmatic way of communicating subtle but important aspects of an artist's work. Even the terms 'life' and 'movement', which are used quite commonly by people who are not professional art critics to indicate aesthetic qualities, are themselves faded metaphors. The use of metaphor enables the critic to indicate the presence or absence of these kinds of qualities. In the absence of a non-metaphoric lexicon that can communicate one's response to the aesthetic qualities of an artwork, there is some justification in taking up the tools at hand, however unsuitable they may seem to be, in order to get the job done.

The language of art criticism is itself criticised from within in the reviews of Rachel Campbell-Johnson and Matthew Collings. Johnson complains that Abts' work has a strong appeal only to 'the sort of inscrutable commentators that contribute to the Tate's Turner leaflet'<sup>148</sup>. Collings also strongly expresses his frustration about the curatorial commentaries provided by the

<sup>146</sup> Schwabsky

<sup>147</sup> Sibley 2001

<sup>148</sup> Campbell-Johnson October 2006

Tate. He complains that they exemplify the worst characteristics of the style, while, at the same time, they fail to provide important contextual information:

Tate Modern's promo-spiels are the language of selling not explaining or educating: the difference is the desperation, the feeling that you could be told absolutely anything at all, which really is powerfully disturbing<sup>149</sup>.

The artworks, he argues, are not being explained, they are simply being hyped-up. Collings links his critique of the language used to discuss art with his critique of Abts' work. Comparing her unfavourably to the leading artists of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism, he argues that when experiencing the work of artists such as Pollock, Picasso and Matisse:

you're forced to think about how paintings are done and what makes them good, not the flowery things that have been said about them or their creators.<sup>150</sup>

The review itself forms part of a larger article in which Collings repeatedly returns to the theme of language and the way it is used or abused in the service of the art world. Later in the article he decries even his own use of such language earlier in the review of Abts:

It's not even helpful to analyse nuances of aesthetic meaning in this context, as I was doing earlier, looking at the qualities of colour and line, and so on, because these are only words. They're for press promos and interviews on the Turner Prize. To take them seriously is to seem foolish.<sup>151</sup>

Collings seems to resile from the use of such language, but if Sibley's view of the function of criticism is correct then the 'language of selling' as Collings puts it, could arguably be considered an appropriate register. The reviews of Tomma Abts' work seem to conform to Sibley's notion of the critic as persuader, who perceives the aesthetic qualities in a work and then uses language to draw the readers' attention to those qualities. What may be

<sup>149</sup> Collings 2006

<sup>150</sup> Collings 2006

<sup>151</sup> Collings 2006

called 'reasons' are given to support the critic's evaluations; in drawing attention to formal qualities – muted colours, organic forms geometrical patterns – the critic indicates the contribution they make to the emergent aesthetic qualities she has identified in this particular case, but there is no basis for her to claim that any artwork that contains muted colours, organic forms and geometrical patterns must necessarily possess those qualities. Carroll sees this as a flaw in criticism; as he puts it the critic:

uses beguiling language to get you to love what he loves, or to see it the way he sees it. He has not grounded his evaluation but rather has attempted to seduce his readers into concurring with him.<sup>152</sup>

However I want to defend the notion that, even if we accept the impossibility of inferring aesthetic qualities from non-aesthetic properties, there are issues raised within the reviews that offer opportunities for reasoned debate that might provide in part some grounding for evaluation, or at least for re-evaluation.

One issue raised by the critics is the question of the relationship between Abts' work and the tradition of modernist abstract painting. If that issue were to be debated, arguments could be marshalled, supported by evidence both from within the works themselves, and from contextual sources to make the case for one conception of that relationship or for another. Comparisons and contrasts could be made, based on analysis of formal characteristics, processes and methods; the influences and training of the artist could be considered and, through that process of research and discussion, we might arrive at a more securely evidenced view about the genre of the paintings and the artist's relationship to abstract painting.

There is clearly a great difference between seeing paintings as belonging to a certain artistic movement, and seeing those paintings as being *about* a certain movement. Perhaps, in simply placing them within the genre of abstract, I did not do justice to the subtleties of their relationship to that tradition, or perhaps

<sup>152</sup> Carroll 2009 p166

I failed to see a satirical or parodic aspect to the work. And if the critic were to persuade me, through reasoned argument and supporting evidence, that I had wrongly classified her paintings, then I might well also revise my view on the character and significance of the work and perhaps also, thereby, my evaluation of it. We will return to this point when we look at Kendall Walton's ideas about categories of art in the next chapter.

The second area that I would argue could provide a subject for reasoned debate is the *characterisation* of the work. There is some consensus on this topic, with all the reviewers referring to the reticence of the paintings. However, at first sight this might not seem a particularly promising avenue, tending to characterise the paintings in the very passages of metaphoric description where the prose is at its most purple. Moreover, there is a major objection to the idea that we could have a reasoned debate on this issue: reticence terms used by the critics are terms that refer to the aesthetic character of the paintings and the reviewers are, as Sibley has argued, unable to provide evidential grounding for a claim that a painting possesses a characteristic such as reticence. To simply accept the view of a critic that a painting is reticent would be to do so on the basis of persuasive rhetoric rather than evidence.

Nevertheless, I will argue that an evidence based discussion of the characterisation of the paintings remains possible and that it may legitimately have a bearing on the evaluation of the work. In this case, several critics identify reticence as a characteristic of a painting: what they disagree upon is how to interpret that reticence. If we were to accept, as a working hypothesis, the view of these several critics (whose characterisations have at least some consensual inter-subjectivity to commend them) that the paintings are, in one way or another, reticent, there would be no reason why we could not then have an evidence based discussion of that reticence, as long as we accepted that the discussion was based on a provisional premise.

The disagreement between reviewers on the issue of characterisation is, in one way, quite the opposite situation to that which obtains in the

disagreements about life and movement in the paintings. In that case all the reviewers were in agreement that, in the particular case of Abts' paintings, life and movement are (or would be) positive features, but they disagreed on whether or not those qualities were present in the work. In this case, all the reviewers see the paintings as reticent (in one way or another) but they disagree on how they interpret that reticence and whether it is a positive feature of the work. I see no fundamental reason why it should not be possible that, if a number of competent critics agree that some kind of reticence is characteristic of the paintings, a reasoned debate could be conducted, perhaps again using formal analysis in dialogue with contextual evidence relating to genre and tradition, to cast light on the nature significance of the property of reticence in the paintings of Tomma Abts.

But the implication of Sibley's account of critical practice is that, although reasons can be given to support an evaluation, there is a point where reasoned argument must break down and that is the point at which that aesthetic property is perceived by the critic. Collings and Searle are highly experienced critics, with expertise in the area of contemporary art. Their reviews of the paintings of Tomma Abts suggest that they each have studied her paintings in detail and thought about them in some depth. They both show awareness of the artistic contexts and traditions within which the works stands. But if Searle sees a line which has the properties of 'sinuousness or surprise and agility', while Collings sees the use of line in the paintings as 'lifeless', then there does not seem to be any way that reasoned debate could settle the matter. Nor is there any obvious way the reader might judge which of the two critics was right. It is not possible simply by reading the descriptions of non-aesthetic properties of the paintings to determine whether the lines in the paintings have agility or are lifeless. The use of metaphor in this case only serves to convey each critic's personal responses to paintings; my only way of deciding whether I agree with Collings or Searle is to view the paintings myself.

#### 4. Noel Carroll and the Art of the Pratfall.

We have seen that in the case of the reviews of Tomma Abts' paintings, there seemed to be critical consensus that the qualities of 'life' and 'movement' in the lines were (or would be) a good thing. That opens up the possibility that for lines in artworks to have life and movement might generally be a good thing. If that were found to be the case, we might decide that the life and movement of line could be used as part of a set of criteria for evaluating visual artworks. This does not involve us in attempting to infer aesthetic qualities from the possession of non-aesthetic properties; as we have noted, the terms 'life' and 'movement' are metaphors used to convey the aesthetic qualities the critic sees in the work. The question is whether we argue for the general principle that these aesthetic qualities of 'life' and 'movement' are good things in artworks.

Of course, there are a number of obvious objections to this suggestion, not least of which is that many artworks are not praised by critics for life and movement, but on the contrary for the very opposite qualities. For example, Antony Gormley, winner of the Turner Prize in 2004, speaking of his decision to use lead as an art material said 'the two qualities of sculpture that are most important are silence and stillness'<sup>153</sup>. The proposal that we can derive principles or criteria through a process of generalising such qualities is inevitably vulnerable to objections based on counter examples, in much the same way that we have seen with criteria based definitions of art.

Nonetheless, some writers, most notably Monroe Beardsley<sup>154</sup>, have attempted to formulate general critical principles, that would cover, not only the visual arts, but music, literature, dance and all other disciplines that might be called art forms. He identified three principles, which he called the General Canons of aesthetic merit, as unity, complexity and intensity.

<sup>153</sup> Antony Gormley interviewed by Enrique Juncosa, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain 2002

<sup>154</sup> Beardsley 1962

Carroll and Sibley have both made telling objections to Beardsley's notion of general aesthetic principles that apply to all artworks. I will not rehearse their arguments in detail here, but I will briefly summarise some of their key objections. Sibley calls Beardsley's attempt to formulate such general principles as 'heroic', but points out the reversibility and inter-dependency of the principles that Beardsley proposes.<sup>155</sup> Carroll rejects the idea of general principles that can be applied to all artworks, in all disciplines, of all kinds. He argues that it would be absurd to try to evaluate a horror movie according to the same criteria as, say, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch still life painting and, instead, proposes evaluative strategies based on specific genre-based critical principles, which I will discuss in detail in this chapter.

Although Sibley and Carroll's objections seriously undermine the idea of general aesthetic principles, Carroll's notion of genre-specific principles, if correct, would potentially open up a back door to allow them to return in a different form. If it were possible to formulate genre-specific criteria for each genre across all disciplines, then the sum total of those criteria would contain all of the positive features that an artwork could possibly possess. An examination of those positive features would undoubtedly reveal many overlaps or similarities between criteria for different genres and disciplines; an example might be that the balancing of tension and relief is important in a thriller novel, but also in an orchestral symphony. That is a case in which the word 'tension' is applicable in both disciplines, music and literature, but there would also be cases in which, although the language used to describe positive features of different genres might be very different, there is nonetheless an underlying similarity between the features themselves. We could begin to group those similar qualities together and name each group. The name of each group could then be regarded as a higher order quality or general principle; the positive features contained within each group would be genre-specific articulations of that general principle.

<sup>155</sup> Sibley 1983

Those general principles might well end up being fairly useless as criteria for the evaluation of art; Sibley's analysis of Beardsley's principles points out the problems that arise if we attempt to apply big, baggy concepts to specific artworks. Moreover, as the formulation of those general principles would depend on the totality of genre-specific criteria already being known, that in itself would make the formulation of general principles redundant. There are a great many other objections that could be put to the argument I have made above, but I make it in order to show that if we accept the idea of genre-specific principles, then the idea of general principles is not something that could be ruled out. However, as I will be arguing that there are problems even with the notion of genre-specific criteria, the idea of trans-disciplinary and trans-generic criteria is not one that will be considered in detail in this study.

### *Genre-specific Criteria*

But what of the narrower claim that Carroll makes in *On Criticism*: that criteria which are genre-specific can be used to evaluate art works? Carroll's solution to what he calls the 'purported absence of critical principles' is to abandon the search for all embracing general criteria and to argue instead that the application of genre-specific criteria to artworks can provide a basis for reasoned aesthetic judgements. There are two ways we could think about genre-specific criteria. The first and most limited would be to consider the aesthetic qualities that are shared by artworks of the same genre, for example that a thriller should be suspenseful. I think that there are a number of objections to that limited claim that I will discuss later in this chapter. However, I think that Noel Carroll goes further than claiming that we can make evaluative judgements on the basis of an artwork possessing certain genre-specific aesthetic qualities; he is prepared to countenance genre-specific arguments for the quality of artworks on the basis of their possessing particular non-aesthetic features.

In the final chapter of *On Criticism*, Carroll challenges the claim by Arnold Isenberg, Mary Mothersill and others that there are no properties that universally guarantee the quality of any artwork; this is of course a view

shared by Sibley. As Isenberg put it, 'There is not in all the world's criticism a single purely descriptive statement concerning which one is prepared to say beforehand, "If it is true, I shall like that work so much the better"'<sup>156</sup>

Carroll summarises Isenberg's objection to the notion of aesthetic criteria as rejection of the following syllogism:

- 1(a) This artwork has property F.
- 1(b) Artworks that have property F are good artworks.
- 2 Therefore this artwork is a good artwork<sup>157</sup>

Isenberg points out the problem of identifying any plausible candidate for 'property F', a property that might be agreed to be a positive feature of any artwork. What may be a merit in one artwork may equally be a flaw in another. As Carroll concedes, 'Pratfalls are excellent in Harold Lloyd comedies, but their presence would have marred Bergman's film *Shame*.'<sup>158</sup>

However, Carroll argues that Isenberg's objection to aesthetic criteria rests on the mistaken assumption that any such criteria must apply universally to all artworks in all disciplines, of all kinds and of every genre. He agrees that it would be absurd to try to evaluate a horror movie according to the same criteria as an 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch still life painting. But, although Carroll rejects the idea of general principles that can be applied to all artworks, he argues that it is perfectly reasonable to believe that *within* each of those two very different genres, criteria could be established that would be specific to that genre.

Carroll gives two examples, one real and one invented, of reasoned evaluation based on criteria. The actual example comes from a review by Joan Acocella<sup>159</sup> of a contemporary dance piece (*Mozart Dances* by the Mark Morris company), but I will look first at his invented illustrative example of how

<sup>156</sup> Isenberg (quoted in Carroll 2009)

<sup>157</sup> Carroll p165

<sup>158</sup> Carroll p164

<sup>159</sup> Carroll p168-169

genre-specific critical principles could be used to make a critical evaluation of a slapstick film comedy.

Using the example of a Harold Lloyd film, Carroll makes the case for specific rather than general criteria by proposing the following modified version of the syllogism in a genre-specific example:

- 1a) Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last* contains (let us agree) many successful pratfalls.
- 1b) *Safety Last* is a slapstick comedy.
- 1c) Given the purpose or function of slapstick comedy, slapstick comedies that contain many successful pratfalls, all other things being equal, are good (pro tanto).
- 2 Therefore *Safety Last* is good (pro tanto).<sup>160</sup>

Carroll comments, "notice that there doesn't seem to be any problem with this particular critical communication"<sup>161</sup> and, on the face of it, the argument that a slapstick comedy is good because it contains many successful pratfalls may seem like a reasonable conclusion based upon evidence. However there are a number of objections to this line of argument.

One possible objection to Carroll's approach might be to say that slapstick, as a form of artwork conspicuously lacking in subtlety or complexity and not overburdened by a body of critical theory, might well be evaluated against easily defined criteria, but more complex art works such as literary novels, abstract painting or symphonic music cannot be evaluated in such a straightforward way. Some might doubt that slapstick comedy can be classed as art at all and that, even if it is an art form in some sense, 'high art' is so different in kind to slapstick comedy that an evaluative strategy developed for one could not possibly be applied to the other.

I do not accept this objection to Carroll's approach. Certainly he has chosen a slapstick comedy as an example precisely because it lacks the complexity and ambiguity of 'high art', but not for unworthy reasons, rather to show more

<sup>160</sup> Carroll p167

<sup>161</sup> Carroll p167

clearly the way in which basic elements of discipline-specific and genre-specific criteria might be utilised within critical practice. On the contrary, Carroll has chosen a slapstick comedy as an example precisely because it lacks the complexity and ambiguity of 'high art' and this is a perfectly respectable manoeuvre, in that it seeks to establish a principle in a relatively simple case which can then be applied to more complex situations. Clearly, a slapstick comedy may be relatively weak in terms of its capacity to generate diverse and competing critical commentary and interpretation, when compared to (for example) *King Lear*; however, this difference does not in itself invalidate Carroll's argument. The difference is one of degree, not of kind. Granted, the criteria for tragic drama may be more difficult to formulate than the criteria for slapstick comedy, but that does not mean that they could not be formulated.

So, let us agree with Carroll that, however unsophisticated a slapstick comedy may appear to be, it is nonetheless an artwork, different to *Lear* in genre, far less rich and complex, but equally valid as an object of critical scrutiny. However, if we accept that slapstick comedy is in fact an art form, there is in my view a more serious problem for Carroll's argument; the question is not whether Carroll is underestimating the complexity of tragedy, but whether he is underestimating the complexity of slapstick.

Before turning to that question, it is important to note that there is some ambiguity about what Carroll is claiming here. In particular, I will argue that there is a problem with the use of the term 'successful' in premise 1b) of his argument. We might interpret the term 'successful' in two distinct ways. In what I will call the *conservative* definition, a 'successful' pratfall is one which is taken place without technical failure; the act of pretending to lose balance, falling, landing on the floor or in water is undertaken and achieved. Competent judges might decide whether a pratfall was successful or not without needing to discuss the aesthetic value of the pratfalls. This use of the word 'successful' would clearly be what Sibley would identify as a non-aesthetic term. In what I will call the *rich* definition of the word 'successful', a pratfall is successful to the extent that it fulfils its comedic function as an

individual; the test of this is whether it makes audiences laugh. Although Carroll does not define the term 'successful' here, when he uses the term in an earlier chapter, it is in his discussion of the 'success value' of artworks, the extent to which an artwork achieves the aims of the artist. Carroll may or may not mean to use the term in the same way here, but whether one reads the term 'successful' as meaning that the pratfall performed in a way that is technically competent, or whether one interprets it as implying a richer definition, there is a problem with the use of the term in the premise of Carroll's argument.

If we assume that Carroll is using the term conservatively, then he is arguing that, '*all things being equal*' (as he says), the presence of many technically competent pratfalls will guarantee the merit of a slapstick comedy. The phrase 'all things being equal' is important here, in that it allows Carroll to avoid one possible objection to his formula: that a slapstick comedy might be full of technically competent pratfalls, but so poor in every other way that we would not wish to call it good. But, although the phrase *all things being equal* closes the door on that objection, it opens the door to suspicion that Carroll is (intentionally or not) justifying a quantitative approach to critical evaluation, and to the objections such an approach would generate.

One way of illustrating what the phrase 'all things being equal' might mean in practice, is by imagining two versions of *Safety Last*. Version A is the film as we know it. Version B comes about as a result of the discovery of several reels of footage featuring technically competent pratfalls that were shot at the time, but (for some reason) never used. Version B is identical to Version A in every way except one: that it contains many more pratfalls. It would then seem to possible to argue that as *Safety Last* version B contains many more successful pratfalls than *Safety Last* version A, then it must therefore be a better slapstick comedy.

Of course the idea that *Safety Last* would necessarily be improved by the addition of more pratfalls is highly questionable and it is it hard to believe that Carroll, who has written extensively and with great insight on cinema over

many years, is in fact subscribing to such a mechanistic and quantitative approach to the evaluation of a film, but it does not seem to be logically inconsistent with his approach. The reason why the addition of extra pratfalls would not guarantee a better version of *Safety Last* is that such features do not work in isolation. Comic set pieces must be integrated into the narrative structure; the direction and editing must take account of the overall pace of the film and the balance between storytelling and clowning needs to be maintained. It is certainly possible to imagine a situation in which we found Version B to be so overburdened with sight gags that it becomes difficult to engage with the story, or develop any empathy with the characters. The addition of extra pratfalls might make *Safety Last* a better film or it might make it worse; we cannot predict the result merely by knowing that one version has many more pratfalls than the other.

It could be argued that I have not played fair with my illustrative example. The objection could be made that Version A and Version B do not illustrate *all things being equal*, but that the comparison is being made between a balanced and well constructed film and one in which the balance between different elements has gone awry. That is undoubtedly the case, but my example does draw attention to the difficulties wrapped up in the phrase *all things being equal*. It also needs to be noted that, although it is true to say that, in the case of Version A and Version B, we are not in the end comparing two films that are equal in all things bar one, the reason this is so is precisely because of the addition of features that it has been claimed are invariably positive.

So one objection to Carroll is that, by looking at pratfalls in isolation, we fail to take account of their function within the structure of the film as a whole. Another is that, in Carroll's formulation, all successful pratfalls are equal; he takes no account of the quality of the feature, he only demands that a pratfall has met the benchmark of being successful (however that is defined) and that there be many of them.

If we use the conservative definition of 'successful' to indicate technical competence, then we must concede that countless films were made containing 'many successful pratfalls', and countless silent comedians performed successful pratfalls. It is also true to say that the majority of those performers are now lost in obscurity together with the films in which they appeared. By contrast, Carroll's choice of Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last*<sup>162</sup> is significant; it is a choice that might suggest that his use of the term 'successful' is much closer to what I have called the rich definition. It is hard to disagree with his conclusion that Harold Lloyd's comedy is a good example of the genre. Critics generally regard Lloyd as one of the great comedy actors of the silent era and *Safety Last* is often cited as one of his best films.

Referring to one of the best known scenes from *Safety Last*, the critic Michael Brooke comments on the significance of the actor:

Though the image of a man dangling many floors above street level while clinging to a disintegrating clock is a shorthand surrogate not just for silent comedy but for early cinema in general, its progenitor Harold Lloyd (1893-1971) has seen his grip on public consciousness become far less secure. Usually relegated to third place behind Chaplin and Keaton in the pantheon, he was in fact the most commercially successful at the time, and arguably more influential in the longer term, his thrill-rides being the direct ancestors of the modern action movie.<sup>163</sup>

So, it seems to me, given Carroll's choice of example, to be more appropriate to apply a rich definition of the term 'successful', one that takes account of much more than the technical competency with which a pratfall is performed. To decide whether a pratfall is successful in the rich sense of the term, we might wish to ask questions of the following kind: In what way does the actor react; expressively or in a deadpan fashion? Is the pratfall 'telegraphed' or is it unexpected? Does the pratfall engage the sympathy of the audience or does it inspire contempt? Is the performance of the pratfall 'realistic' (in the sense that it appears to cause the actor the level of injury and pain we might expect of such an incident in everyday life), or is it a 'clowning' pratfall of the

<sup>162</sup> Pathé 1923

<sup>163</sup> Brooke p84

kind familiar in cartoons (where exploding dynamite might cause little more than a blackened face)? To what extent does the pratfall reveal the nature of the character performing it, and to what extent do the reactions of other players in the scene reveal the nature of those characters? To what extent does the pratfall move forward or disrupt the narrative? These are the kinds of questions that would need to be considered if we wished to judge the extent to which the pratfall achieved its comedic function.

Mark Cooper's account of the clock scene, which was referred to earlier by Michael Brooke, is a good example of a critic evaluating a slapstick routine as successful in the rich sense of the term. He describes the scene in which Harold Lloyd (playing a character called The Boy) attempts to climb a tall building with the help of a character called Bill:

... The Boy's struggles to overcome a number of unexpected obstacles which drive him to ever more dangerous heights. On the second floor, seeds dumped on The Boy's head from out of the top of frame inspire a pigeon attack. Between the second and third floors, he reaches for a handhold and grabs an entangling net. Nearing the top and hanging desperately from one of the hands of the building's clock, he reaches for a rope Bill has offered. Straining and stretching, he grabs it at last—and plummets out of frame. In order to prepare these gags and give them their punch, the film shows us what The Boy cannot see. An interior shot of a sporting goods store and exterior shot of a man dropping a tennis net partly out the window prepare the net gag, for example. And intercut interior shots show us, first, that the rope is not attached to anything and, then, that Bill has managed to evade the cop long enough to dive for the rope just before it disappears out the window. Sequences like this one generate humour as well as suspense by revealing the visual field to be defined by obstacles to enframed vision and movement. It is the trouble we see moments before the comedian does that gets the laugh.<sup>164</sup>

Cooper points to the way the slapstick functions within the narrative structure, the way in which audiences' expectations are excited and confounded, the use of suspense, the role of film editing techniques in providing the audience with a privileged viewpoint, and contrasting use of revealed pitfalls and unexpected obstacles.

<sup>164</sup> Cooper p62

As well as maintaining the balance between humour and suspense, the film engages the audience by encouraging an empathic response to the plight of the central character. Michael Brooke notes the way in which the character Lloyd depicts on screen engaged the audience of the day:

Lloyd didn't need glasses off screen, but they became as recognisable a signature as Chaplin's bowler and cane. They accentuated the essential vulnerability of his typically ordinary-Joe characters (he occasionally played millionaires, but far less often), giving him a Woody Allen geekiness that offered his audience much more in the way of wish-fulfilment identification.<sup>165</sup>

Brooke's analysis seems to suggest that one element which made the pratfalls in *Safety Last* successful (in the rich sense) is that they were performed by Lloyd playing in character, a character that members of the audience might see as both vulnerable and as someone much like themselves. This identification by an audience with the character played by Lloyd must clearly be a significant factor in the success and memorability of his films and the comic set pieces featured in them. The technical success of the pratfall is only part of the story; it matters that what happens on screen is meaningful to the audience, both in terms of narrative and in terms of empathic response to character.

If we compare Richard Cork's response to McQueen's *Deadpan* we can see that empathic response and implied narrative are also identified as important elements of the piece:

McQueen uses himself as the absurd yet resilient figure who makes no attempt to escape from a falling house. He fills the end wall with *Deadpan*, making viewers feel that the house is descending on them as well. It pitches forward with frightening speed and heaviness, accentuated by McQueen's decision to film the event from several different vantages. Repeating the fall serves to increase our respect for the man who defies it. He knows that the blank window will save him, by passing neatly over his head and crashing at his feet. But his refusal to do anything except blink still seems laudable, and the film

<sup>165</sup> Brooke *Sight & Sound* October 2000 Vol 17 Issue 10 p84-84

terminates with McQueen's steady, impassive face staring out stoically from the screen. Without indulging in Hollywood heroics, he seems braced to endure adversity with calm, stubborn resolve.<sup>166</sup>

The sight gag that McQueen recreates is the famous comic moment from what critics agree is one of the best film comedies of the silent era, but the way in which McQueen has played the central role removes from it any hint of comedy, as Cork's empathic response to the piece makes clear. Nonetheless the stunt featured in *Deadpan* was a technically successful performance of a stunt that was a positive feature of a slapstick comedy. However, it does not follow that if we incorporated the stunt from McQueen's *Deadpan* into a version of Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last*, it would be a positive feature of the film. The mere presence of a successful pratfall in a slapstick comedy does not come with the guarantee of being a positive feature, and if that pratfall works in a way that is at odds with the meaning and narrative context of the film, then is it likely to have a negative impact on the work as a whole.

Carroll's formulation of genre-specific criteria appears at first to bring simplicity to the problem of critical criteria, but problems begin when we start to unpack his term 'successful'. It is not entirely clear from Carroll's argument whether his use of the word is intended to be understood according a conservative interpretation or a rich interpretation (as I have characterised them). Either way there are problems.

I would argue that the use of a conservative interpretation of Carroll's term 'successful' is inadequate for the task of critical evaluation. The idea that the merit of an artwork can be inferred merely from the presence of a number of technically successful typical generic features leads to an impoverished account of critical evaluation.

Use of the rich interpretation of the term 'successful' fails the test set by Isenberg as the phrase 'successful pratfall' thereby implies more than what Isenberg calls a 'purely descriptive' statement. To label a pratfall successful

<sup>166</sup> BBC News online 2 December 1999

in the rich sense requires the exercise of judgement, as it must involve the evaluation of the pratfall in the context of the larger work, the film as a whole. The problem is that if we use the rich interpretation of the term, the judgement of a pratfall as successful within the context of a slapstick comedy amounts to critical evaluation in itself; if the rich interpretation of the term 'successful' is applied in Carroll's formulation, then evaluative judgement exists in both the premise and the conclusion. The problem of critical criteria is not solved but merely pushed back a step.

That is not to say that we should therefore reject the notion that critical evaluation can be based on reasons; in fact, the writings on Lloyd quoted above might be considered good examples of critics using reasoned arguments to support their evaluative judgements. However, while I am in sympathy with Carroll's wish to establish an account of critical evaluation based on reasoned argument, I believe that his argument in this case falls short of being a solution to the problem of critical criteria.

In his example based on an actual review, Carroll shows how Joan Acocella, through close analysis of the performance *Mozart Dances*, uncovers a suggested narrative running through the piece and uses it to support her positive evaluation of the work. Here, Carroll argues, is the use of genre – specific criteria within criticism. The presence of a 'suggested narrative' within is not being claimed as a positive feature of every artwork but "Rather, she is restricting her claim to the works of modern abstract choreography..." However, I would argue that Acocella's claim for the positive impact of suggested narrative is more restrictive still. She is claiming no more than that it is a positive feature of this particular performance; it is Carroll who seeks to generalise her comments. There are two problems with this attempt to create a critical principle that specifically applies to modern abstract choreography. The first is that there are examples which do not conform to this criteria; the work of choreographer Merce Cunningham, for example, involved deliberately eschewing any kind of narrative, suggested or otherwise. His obituary in the *New Republic* noted that his dances were, 'cerebral and abstract, rigorously

formal designs with no story and no 'meaning' other than the dance itself.'<sup>167</sup> Cunningham's aim was to exclude narrative from his choreography. If a suggested narrative had emerged within one of his dance pieces, it would not be something that the artist himself would have welcomed as a positive feature of the work.

The second problem again centres on the question of quality. In this example it is clear that Carroll is talking about a feature that can be described using non-aesthetic terms. It certainly requires interpretive skills to identify a submerged narrative within a contemporary dance performance, but identifying that such a narrative exists within the piece does not involve making an evaluative judgement. Indeed, for Carroll there seems to be an absence of interest in the nature of the suggested narrative or what it might be saying; it appears to be enough that that a piece *has* such a suggested narrative. The quality of the narrative, its meaning and its aptness or otherwise for the medium and choreography are not, for Carroll, matters that require consideration. Carroll requires us to make only a binary judgement; suggested narrative is something that a dance either has or has not. If we are to agree with Carroll that possessing a suggested narrative is in itself a positive characteristic of abstract contemporary dance, then it seems we are invited to do so regardless of the quality or meaning of that narrative. Be it hackneyed, be it trite, be it crassly propagandist, predictable or banal, for Carroll it apparently only needs to be present to be regarded as a positive feature of the work.

Let us examine in more detail the structure of the syllogism Carroll has applied to *Safety Last*, leaving to one side, for a moment, both the problematic term 'successful', and the difficulties that I have suggested accompany the phrase 'all things being equal'. We can see that the structure of his example may be put in the following terms, where A is the artwork, F is the feature it contains, and M an indication of magnitude (ie *many, much, prominently*):

<sup>167</sup> Jennifer Homans 'Merce Cunningham (1919 – 2009)' *New Republic* 31 July 2009

- 1a) A contains MF
- 1b) A is an example of G
- 1c) Given the purpose of G, examples of G that contain MF, all other things being equal, are good (pro tanto).
- 2 Therefore A is good (pro tanto).

There are a number of questions that arise when we strip it down in this way. One is to do with the significance of the term M in the premise. In Carroll's example, 'Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last* contains many successful pratfalls', M stands for 'many'. The importance of M becomes clear if we replace the word with 'few' or 'some'. For Carroll's syllogism to sound convincing, M must indicate that the feature F is a significant element of A.

Clearly, in some cases, 'many' would not be the appropriate term to indicate the significance of F. For example the, critics agreed that Tomma Abts made use of shadow to create an ambiguous illusion of shallow depth on the flat surface of her paintings. In fact, one of the critics did not consider this a positive feature of the paintings, but let us suppose that there was unanimity that (let us call it) *shadowed depth* was a positive feature, not only of these particular paintings, but would be a positive feature of all non-figurative painting. It would then be possible to construct a syllogism on the lines Carroll proposes in which G is abstract painting, and F is shadowed depth.

The question then arises of what M represents in this context. At this point there is a difficulty. The word 'many' is clearly not appropriate, so perhaps we could say that *much* of Abts's painting uses shadowed depth. If so, then it would only be necessary to measure the paintings (easy in the case of Abts, as all are the same dimensions) and calculate what proportion of the surface area of each is painted to produce an illusion of shadowed depth. However, those reviewers who praised the use of (what I have called) shadowed depth also indicated that it was the sparing use of the effect that contributed to their appraisal of it as a positive feature, that Abts only occasionally broke the flatness of the painting's surface with the illusion of depth.

Nonetheless, the critics are agreed that shadowed depth is a significant feature of the work, so perhaps M could represent some phrase such as 'is a significant element' or 'features prominently'. The problem here is that, to judge that shadowed depth 'is a significant element' of a Tomma Abts painting requires more than a tape measure, it requires judgement about the relationship between different elements of an artwork. The problem with the term M is similar to the problem with the term 'successful'; it once again places evaluative judgement into the premise of Carroll's syllogism. I will return to this problem when we discuss an alternative approach to classification, proposed by Kendall Walton, which I will argue avoids some of the problems that arise from Carroll's notion of genre.

The idea of genre is central in Carroll's approach to evaluation. It is by virtue of their genre specificity that his proposed criteria for the evaluation of artwork are deemed to be less vulnerable to contradiction by counter example. In order to correctly judge a work therefore, the critic must correctly identify to which genre it belongs.

In the case of Tomma Abts, it seems on the face of it to be a simple matter to define G. She has often been described as an abstract painter and, although reviews of her work left some room for debate about her precise relationship with the genre, arguably a more precise definition of genre would only lead to a more precise definition of F. One way of defining the genre of her paintings is to look at the paintings themselves; we observe that her paintings do not contain figuration. Another way is to look at the context and to note how her work is described by critics, curators, dealers and by herself.

Taking Abts' work as an example, we can see the way in which Carroll's genre-specific approach is successful in eliminating troublesome counter examples. Having seen that life and movement are positively valenced terms within reviews of her paintings, we consider whether they are generally positive features of artwork. We see that there are many counter examples and so decide to refine our hypothesis to one that asserts that, in the case of paintings belonging to the genre of abstract art (leaving aside for a moment

any disputes about whether the work of Abts belongs in this genre), it is a positive thing for line to have life and movement. Again, it would be possible to find counter-examples, but those counter-examples would certainly be fewer in number than under our earlier hypothesis. That being so, it seems reasonable to imagine that by refining our assertion we might improve its predictive potential. We might define in more detail the precise genre to which we intend to apply this assertion. We might revise our terms 'life' and 'movement' in ways that better reflected the positive aesthetic qualities we wished to identify in the work. If we did so then, it could be argued, we might end up by defining a feature of that genre which is invariably positive. Those exceptions to the rule would be so vanishingly small that we might reasonably prefer to reconsider whether they should be included in the genre, rather than further revise our criteria.

The problem with the argument made above is the one pointed out by Hook in the introductory chapter: even if we could show that there were no counter examples to contradict the criteria we formulated, there is no guarantee that one will not occur in the future; someone may produce an abstract painting that we judge to be excellent, that not only lacks the quality we identify as positive, but would be marred by its presence. The only way in which we could guarantee that our criteria always applied would be if we defined the genre in terms of the positive quality: to define, for instance, abstract painting as non-figurative art that showed life and movement in its formal composition. To do that would be to introduce a fatal circularity into the formula.

Moreover, applying Carroll's notion of genre becomes still more problematic when we consider a work like Steve McQueen's *Deadpan*. If we were to try to apply Carroll's approach to features in McQueen's work then we would need to identify the terms in his syllogism:

- 1a) *Deadpan* contains MF
- 1b) *Deadpan* is an example of G
- 1c) Given the purpose of G, examples of G that contain MF, all other things being equal, are good (pro tanto).
- 2 Therefore *Deadpan* is good (pro tanto).

Clearly a central issue, if we are to put Carroll's syllogism to use, is that of identifying genre, indeed identification of genre has to be the starting point. Unless we identify G, we cannot identify F, as F is defined in the premise (1c) as a good-making feature of G. So, in order to know what features of *Deadpan* to pay attention to, we need to know what genre it belongs to. As we did in the case of Abts, we might start our enquiry by looking at the work itself.

*Deadpan* is a black and white silent film which consists, in its entirety, of a slapstick comedy pratfall, or at least a remake of a sight gag from a slapstick comedy. The stunt can certainly be considered a successful pratfall, as it re-creates the most famous scene from what is considered by critics to be one of the best silent comedy films of the era. This, of course, did not lead critics to consider the work a slapstick comedy, or to judge it by those standards; other aspects of the work made it clear it did not belong to the genre. The scene itself was de-contextualised, taken from its original context as part of a narrative and instead shown as a four minute loop. Whatever its source material, from the way it is structured and edited it is clear that the genre of *Deadpan* is not slapstick comedy.

The context in which the film was presented also provides evidence that might help us identify the genre. The film was being shown, not in a cinema, but in an art gallery, projected floor to ceiling in an otherwise empty room. It was being shown as part of McQueen's Turner Prize shortlist exhibition. The immediate context identifies *Deadpan* as piece of contemporary art. We can also look at the wider context and examine the statements of commentators and of the artist himself. The Tate Gallery notes for the shortlist exhibition of 1999 describe McQueen as a filmmaker and video artist. Several commentators also consider it relevant to describe McQueen in terms of his race; Andrew Gellatly<sup>168</sup> discusses *Deadpan* in the context of black art. The piece itself is variously described by critics as a short film or a film installation.

<sup>168</sup> *Freize* Issue 46 May 1999

So, it is obviously more appropriate to evaluate *Deadpan* as a contemporary art film installation than it is to evaluate it as a slapstick comedy and, indeed, all reviews of the piece do just that. What is not clear is how, having classified the piece in that way, we can then use that definition to identify F. The problem here is that the classifications employed by critics and commentators do not amount to a definition of genre. To say that *Deadpan* is a film, or to say that it is an installation, is to identify only its medium; the classification does not imply any particular sets of aims or conventions. The third part of the premise (1c) demands that we consider the 'purpose' of G; a work of art that is made using the medium of film installation may have many different purposes and those purposes are not defined by the medium.

Defining *Deadpan* as 'black art' may be more fruitful in generating the kinds of purposes demanded in the premise (1c). We might argue that, among the purposes of black art, would be aims such as raising awareness of issues of race or challenging stereotypes. However, socially committed artwork by black artists comes in many forms and such artists adopt a wide variety of styles or artistic approaches, and indeed work within a number of clearly identifiable genres; black art is identifiable in relation to its subject matter and its authorial perspective rather than by its conformity to the conventions of a genre. To regard black art as in any way constituting a generic definition would be to make a category error that was both inaccurate and insulting.

We are left with classifying *Deadpan* as 'contemporary art'. On the face of it this does not look like a particularly useful approach, as contemporary art is itself a term whose definition is not straightforward. The term is not simply an indication of when the work was produced; an artwork produced decades ago might be labelled contemporary art, while an artwork produced this week might not. Contemporary art is certainly a label that is most intelligible when considered as an institutional definition, and one way we might go about describing it could be to say that it is the kind of art that can be seen in the Turner Prize exhibitions. However, a set of artworks that includes *Deadpan*, Tracey Emin's bed and the paintings of Tomma Abts does not present much in the way of obvious common features.

While arguing in favour of as what he sees as a return to genre-based criticism, Carroll acknowledges the challenge that is presented by contemporary art:

Yet perhaps the only serious art is avant-garde art, and of course there is a great deal of avant-garde art, art of the new, which may attempt to defy utterly any categorisation. But, *entre nous*, it does not. There are clearly genres and traditions in the originality game, such as those of transgression and reflexivity. It is true that one frequently cannot tell what category a work of visual art belongs to simply by looking, but there is no reason not to use contextual and institutional clues to facilitate classification. Such information is perfectly legitimate when it comes to categorising artworks. Moreover, most avant-garde art can be sorted into movements, such as Cubism, Photorealism, Pop Art, Minimalism, Postmodernism, and so on.<sup>169</sup>

Carroll acknowledges the difficulty presented by contemporary practice, and offers an approach which attempts to reconcile a genre-based critical procedure with the apparent resistance of avant-garde artists to operating within the rules of established genres. Carroll rightly points to the importance of contextual information in categorising artworks. He argues that, despite the rapid change, innovation and repudiation of past styles that characterises contemporary art, it is still possible for critics to categorise this new work in ways that will provide a foundation for a critical practice that is based on reasoned argument and supported by a plentiful supply of contextual evidence:

The institution of the art world in which avant-garde art operates also swells with information about emerging categories of art, even as they exfoliate before our very eyes. There are interviews, manifestos, artist's statements, curatorial statements, grant applications, and lectures/ demonstrations, not to mention a constant circuit of conversations (a.k.a. incessant gossip) between artists and artists, artists and critics and curators, critics and critics, curators and curators, and all of the permutations thereof and more.<sup>170</sup>

<sup>169</sup> Carroll p95

<sup>170</sup> Carroll p185-186

From this source material, Carroll argues, it is possible to establish the values and interests connected with the new emergent categories of contemporary art. In this regard he emphasises the role of the critic:

The informed critic, covering the experimental beat, usually has a general grasp of the contours of the emanent avant-garde forms and their subtending aspirations as those forms unfold before us. Perhaps needless to say, one of the major functions of such critics is to keep the interested audience apprised of the appearance of new artforms, genres, styles and movements and to explain their points and purposes in a way that assists the laity in understanding them.<sup>171</sup>

Carroll casts the critic as one who is, in effect, writing the first draft of art history and he cites the example of Michael Fried documenting the emergent category of Minimalism. He also acknowledges that work might be classified as belonging to more than one genre, but is confident that the 'plural category' critic will be able to deal with art works that operate within two sets of conventions.

The picture Carroll paints, of a bewildering variety of new forms in a constant state of creation and mutation, does indeed place the critic in a heroic role, making sense of this apparent chaos for the benefit of the public. However, in the case of *Deadpan*, I'm not sure this rings true. The short film as art object has been around since at least the 1920s, installation art has been around for over half a century, and the use of moving image in gallery artworks has been very common indeed since the development of cheaper video technology in the 1970s.

What Carroll is talking about when he describes the 'constant circuit of conversations' of the contemporary art world is not a discourse that defines discrete genres but a broader context in which different interconnecting traditions are in play. That is not to downplay the importance of context; each one of the contexts noted by reviewers provides a useful perspective on *Deadpan*. It is useful to consider the work as an art installation, as a short art

<sup>171</sup> Carroll p186

film, or to consider the relevance of it being a work that is both by and featuring a black artist. Each of these contextual frameworks provides points of comparison and contrast with the work of other artists. What they do not provide, however, are sets of conventions against which we could measure the success of the artwork, or features that we could identify as guaranteeing the quality of the work.

I have pointed out some problems attached to Carroll's approach, in particular in his notion of genre. I think that these problems weaken his argument in general, but in particular they call into question the usefulness of the idea of genre in evaluating art of the kinds that feature in the Turner Prize exhibitions, work that, as Carroll says, attempts to, 'defy utterly any categorisation'. Yet I want to agree with Carroll about the importance of classification; the reviews of Abts, for example, show how much care the critics take to locate her work as precisely as possible in relation to modernist abstraction. In the case of McQueen however, the attempt to place it within a meaningful genre does not seem to get us very far. Classification is clearly important, but Carroll's notion of genre and its 'purposes' seems to be too blunt an instrument to capture much of contemporary art.

One problem with Carroll's notion of genre is that, although he accepts the emergence of new forms and the changing conventions of genres, there does not seem to be an obvious reason why this should be so. If established genres have critical principles attached to them, and the best works in that genre are by definition those that conform to those critical principles, there would not seem to be any impetus or mechanism from within that artistic and critical nexus for artists to deviate from those principles, nor for those principles to vary over time. I emphasise that I am referring to internal tendencies towards change and innovation. Certainly, art changes in response to its changing historical context, but, if the evaluation of art centres around the kind of genre definitions Carroll suggests, then it seems likely the art world would tend to be far more resistant to change, being dragged along behind more rapid social and political changes.

## *Genre and Category*

Kendall Walton's concept of artistic categories may offer a more fruitful and less rigid way of informing evaluation through classification. In his essay 'Categories of Art' he concurs with Sibley about the relationship between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties of an artwork, arguing that 'a work's aesthetic properties depend on its non-aesthetic properties; the former are emergent or Gestalt properties based on the latter'. However, for Walton, the aesthetic properties of an artwork are dependent on its being placed in the correct category, and its properties being viewed in the context of that category:

I will argue however, that a work's aesthetic properties depend not only on its non-aesthetic ones, but also on which of its non-aesthetic properties are 'standard', which 'variable' and which 'contra-standard'.<sup>172</sup>

This may sound rather like Carroll's notion of artworks being evaluated against the conventions of a genre, but there are some important differences. Walton's categories may be definable in terms of identifiable common non-aesthetic features, but those features do not carry the implication that their presence would, in themselves, substantiate positive or negative appraisals of the work. Walton gives examples of 'standard', 'variable' and 'contra-standard' features of painting:

The flatness of a painting and the motionlessness of its markings are standard, and its particular shapes and colors are variable, relative to the category of painting. A protruding three-dimensional object or an electrically driven twitching of the canvas would be contra-standard relative to this category. The straight lines in stick-figure drawings and squarish shapes in cubist paintings are standard with respect to those categories respectively, though they are variable with respect to the categories of drawing and painting.<sup>173</sup>

<sup>172</sup> Walton 1970

<sup>173</sup> Walton p340

The example of 'squarish shapes in cubist paintings' highlights an important aspect of Walton's approach. He notes that, within the category of painting, 'squarish shapes' are variable, but within cubist painting they are a standard feature.

This is a subtle and powerful aspect of Walton's concept of category: the recognition that features of an artwork that might be considered standard, when viewed in one category, might be considered variable or contra-standard when viewed in another. He illustrates this with a thought experiment:

Imagine a society which does not have an established medium of painting, but does produce a kind of work of art called *guernicas*. *Guernicas* are like versions of Picasso's 'Guernica' done in various bas-relief dimensions. All of them are surfaces with the colors and shapes of Picasso's 'Guernica,' but the surfaces are molded to protrude from the wall like relief maps of different kinds of terrain. Some *guernicas* have rolling surfaces, others are sharp and jagged, still others contain several relatively flat planes at various angles to each other, and so forth. Picasso's 'Guernica' would be counted as a *guernica* in this society – a perfectly flat one – rather than as a painting. Its flatness is variable and the figures on its surface are standard relative to the category of *guernicas*. Thus the flatness, which is standard for us, would be variable for members of the other society (if they should come across 'Guernica') and the figures on the surface, which are variable for us, would be standard for them. This would make for a profound difference between our aesthetic reaction to 'Guernica' and theirs. It seems violent, dynamic, vital, disturbing to us. But I imagine it would strike them as cold, stark, lifeless, or serene and restful, or perhaps bland, dull, boring – but in any case *not* violent, dynamic, and vital. We do not pay attention to or take note of Guernica's flatness; this is a feature we take for granted in paintings, as it were. But for the other society this is 'Guernica's' most striking and noteworthy characteristic – what is *expressive* about it.<sup>174</sup>

Walton's imagined *guernicas* illustrate an important aspect of his approach: that it recognises that artworks can and do exist in a plurality of categories; indeed the number of categories is potentially limitless. Walton argues that the aesthetic properties of the work are dependent on what is standard,

<sup>174</sup> Walton p347

variable or contra-standard to a particular person at a particular moment. This concept of categories points to a solution to the problem of defining M, with respect to the use of *shadowed depth* in the paintings of Tomma Abts. As Walton points out, it is not the size of feature or the number of features that necessarily marks them out for our attention:

A very small coloured area of an otherwise entirely black and white drawing would be very disconcerting. But if enough additional colour is added to it we will see it as a coloured rather than a black and white drawing and the shock will vanish...<sup>175</sup>

We can see the way in which looking at standard, variable and contra-standard features would work in the case of Tomma Abts. To summarise crudely the views of two of the critics, Schwabsky sees the paintings as relating to a certain strand of European modernist abstraction; Collings, on the other hand, views the paintings as a post-modernist appropriation. Both focus on the use of *shadowed depth* as a contra-standard feature of the work. Collings disapproves and takes this as a sign that the work is not in earnest. Schwabsky, on the other hand, approves of this deviation from the principle of flatness championed in the heyday of Abstract Expressionism by critics such as Clement Greenberg. He admires the way the Abts' paintings pit themselves against 'the 'allover' of Greenbergian abstraction, just as depicted shadows violate the tenets of the modernism with which the paintings might otherwise seem to keep faith.'<sup>176</sup>

As Carroll's syllogism makes clear, for him a genre is an established classification that has identifiable purposes (he gives the example that the purpose of a thriller is to thrill) and conventions, from which he argues we can derive critical principles. Carroll's genres seem to work like the different classes in a dog show; tastes may change over time; judges may retire and be replaced but the criteria for judging each class of dog can, at least theoretically, be known in advance. Carroll does concede that some works may involve a splicing of genres, but it is clear from the examples he offers

<sup>175</sup> Walton p347

<sup>176</sup> Schwabsky

that he considers these to be exceptions. Walton's approach, on the other hand, recognises that artworks exist in multiple categories and, by paying attention to the variable and contra-standard features of those categories, our understanding of the artwork can be much more finely tuned.

Walton's recognition of the multiple category provides an account of the mechanism of change within recognised categories of artwork. For example, if an artwork that contains a contra-standard feature is nonetheless accepted as belonging to a certain category of artwork, then the gestalt of that category is thereby changed. If other artworks copy that contra-standard feature and are also accepted into the category, then, over time, that feature may be considered as a variable feature rather than as contra-standard. Carroll's notion of genre on the other hand is one in which there are certain features that we can know in advance are always guaranteed to be positive. If that is so, then it follows that, within the genre, those features will always be positive, no matter how far into the future we project. Under those circumstances, it is hard to see how or why, despite the passage of time, those genres would change substantially in the future, and it is equally hard to account for the substantial changes that have happened in the past.

Walton's approach provides an account of the creation of new categories of art through innovative and avant-garde practice. He cites the creation of the first twelve-tone works by Schoenberg as an example of artistic innovation, but it is an example that also underlines one key aspect of his approach: that it is not relativistic. For Walton, although there are many categories, the ideal critic will see the work in the correct one. He makes the point that perhaps only Schoenberg's close colleagues Berg and Webern would have been capable of hearing them in the correct category, that is as twelve tone works. Others might have found them baffling and chaotic. Nevertheless, Walton argues, even if there had been no one but the composer himself who would have been able to hear them as twelve-tone music, that would have been the correct category for appraising their aesthetic properties.

There is an apparent contradiction in Walton's approach here. Unlike Carroll,

who sees no problem in classifying artworks on the basis of contextual information, Walton insists that the category of a work of art must be perceptually distinguishable. Yet Walton also insists that only a listener who was capable of hearing Schoenberg's first twelve-tone works in the correct category, as twelve-tone works, would be able to perceive the aesthetic qualities of the work. Yet, as Walton has pointed out, a listener in the 1920s would have been unable to correctly categorise Schoenberg's music, unless they undertook contextual research, perhaps by gaining access to the discussions of the composer with Berg and Webern, within which discourse his compositional theory developed. However, that research undertaken, the fact that a certain Schoenberg composition fell into the category of twelve-tone music would then be perceptually distinguishable to the listener. It is important to understand that Walton's insistence on categories of art being perceptually distinguishable does not imply that contextual research is in any way illegitimate. Rather, it implies the opposite; the category of an artwork is only perceptually distinguishable when the viewer has the clearest understanding of its artistic context.

This insistence that not all categories within which an artwork might be viewed are equally correct, directs attention to the role of the critic. In order to be able to fully appreciate the aesthetic qualities of an artwork, one needs to view it in the correct category. As Walton points out:

We are likely to regard, for example, cubist paintings, serial music or Chinese music as formless, incoherent or disturbing on our first contact with these forms, largely because, I would suggest, we would not be perceiving the works as cubist paintings, serial music or Chinese music.<sup>177</sup>

The more knowledge and experience of a category one has, therefore, the more one is able to identify the variable and contra-standard features. As a result of that greater knowledge and experience we may appreciate qualities we did not previously perceive. We might also downgrade our evaluation of works that once seemed striking, but now seem merely generic. Walton's

<sup>177</sup> Walton p349

approach, unlike Carroll's, recognises that excellence may sometimes consist, not in conforming to generic standards, but in deviating from them.

One viewer might simply see a Tomma Abts painting as an example of 'modern art', while a viewer with more experience of contemporary art might see it as an abstract painting. The critics located it in categories that related to modernist and post-modernist practice. We might also consider the category 'the paintings of Tomma Abts', within which a reviewer identified a splash of bright colour as a contra-standard feature. Although Walton gives guidelines for identifying the correct category within which to place an artwork, the example of Schoenberg shows that he does not see this as simply slotting the artwork into a pre-existent genre. Walton's approach has categories emerging from the properties of the artworks themselves. As Bruce Laetz puts it:

Artworks have properties, and for any property or set of properties they possess, there is a corresponding category to which a work thus belongs in virtue of it, regardless of whether we have a name for that category, use it, or care about it.<sup>178</sup>

If Walton is right, then the core role of the critic is to identify as precisely as possible the correct category in which to view the artwork, even if that category is not a pre-existent genre with a defined set of purposes and conventions.

Andrew Gellatly's review of *Deadpan* shows a strong concern with locating and defining the correct category within which to view the work:

Steve McQueen's compulsive four minute film *Deadpan* (1997) makes a case for how multi-layered, fascinating and complex a short film can be.

He may be inviting us to give in to a temptation to privilege the social and documentary role of black art, but is also presenting us with a gag and a compelling study in purgatory more economical than Nauman's *Clown Torture* (1986). An establishing shot near the beginning of the film reveals that McQueen's boots have no laces,

<sup>178</sup> Laetz 2010

as though he is in detention overnight with the possibility of suicide taken away. *Deadpan* may look like someone compulsively revisiting a trauma, but McQueen doesn't look like the usual performance artist - standing like a tall and stoic prisoner surrounded by collapsing walls, he is too massive and unblinking, while the flickering, repetitive optical experience is dense, chest-tightening and fleshy.

McQueen is establishing a thoughtful language of film, built from the most discreet and historical elements, which hang awkwardly between elaborations of Structuralist film theory and the polemic of Henry Louis Gates Jr.<sup>179</sup>

Gellatly identifies a number of important contexts. By making the comparison to Bruce Nauman's piece *Clown Torture*, he invites us to consider *Deadpan* in the context of video installation art. Gellatly also suggests that *Deadpan* can be seen as an attempt to forge a new category or artistic approach, informed by Structuralist critical theory, and describing McQueen as being engaged in 'establishing a thoughtful language of film'. He also refers to performance art and indicates that McQueen's demeanour in his performance would be contra-standard in this category. His allusion to black art alerts us to the possibility that this work may have a 'social and documentary' purpose, citing the work of black cultural critic Henry Louis Gates Jr as a reference. I objected earlier to defining black art as a genre and I will return to that issue in a moment, but it seems reasonable to describe it as a recognisable category of art, and it is not surprising that most reviewers discussed *Deadpan* in the context of ethnicity. This aspect of *Deadpan* would clearly be an important element in defining the correct category within which to view the work. Many reports noted that McQueen was the first black artist to take the Prize since it was won by painter Chris Ofili in 1998. Ofili was also an artist whose ethnicity was seen as central to his work.

In *Art Monthly*, Dave Beech reviewed the exhibition that led to Ofili's nomination. His review centres on Ofili's identity as a black artist. He contrasts Ofili's paintings with that of earlier black artists who have used newer and less conventional means:

<sup>179</sup> Gellatly 1999

Being a black artist is not simply a matter of happening to be black and choosing to be an artist. It is an exacting task which calls for inventiveness and guile. In art you have to struggle to be black. In fact, in art you have to struggle to be anything. Critical postmodernists subverted and resisted racism in art by establishing alternative forms of attention, often through the use of unconventional forms such as performance, video and installation. Chris Ofili makes beautiful paintings. Far from being a failure to live up to the works and arguments of the likes of Rasheed Araeen, however, Ofili's paintings continue the struggle to be a black artist from the perspective of a younger generation.<sup>180</sup>

Niru Ratnam in the *New Left Review* also sees black art and black popular culture as the key context of Ofili's work, underpinning the subject matter, techniques and materials used in the work. He also notes the extra information that had been provided in order to give viewers of the paintings greater awareness of that context:

Ofili has made his ethnicity the subject of his work. The elephant dung might be the most celebrated signifier of his cultural background in his work, but it is far from the only one. Almost everything in his paintings, from his use of magazine cut-outs to his more controversial appropriation of the dots used by cave-painters in the Matapos Hills in Zimbabwe, refers back to Ofili's ethnicity. The exhibition catalogue for his Serpentine show even had an extended glossary at the back explaining such phenomena as hip-hop, the Wu-Tang Clan and the Notting Hill Carnival to those gallery-goers less than familiar with the contemporary black British scene.<sup>181</sup>

Beech takes care to locate Ofili's work as precisely as possible within black art, by reference to his methodology and the iconography he includes in his paintings. Beech points out the range of references in the paintings and emphasises Ofili's work as speaking through those references rather than simply quoting them; for Beech the work is an articulation of Ofili's identity as a black artist rather than an attempt to conform to a set of pre-determined ideas about what black art should be:

... Ofili's work is populated by stereotypes. He has even presented himself, in interviews and other publicity, as a stereotypical black

<sup>180</sup> Dave Beech 'Chris Ofili' *Art Monthly* no217 31-3 June 1998

<sup>181</sup> Niru Ratnam 'Chris Ofili and the Limits of Hybridity' *New Left Review* 1/235 May-June 1999

man in the blaxploitation style. Ofili is not a retro artist but, like the hip hop culture he loves, his work is littered with samples and name-checks from the glorious era of civil rights and blaxploitation. In fact, his paintings invite a truly diverse company of images and references into their patterned networks. This does not turn them into ideal spaces of liberal tolerance where 'kitsch hangs out with sophistication' (to quote from the catalogue). It is never this black and white. Nor is the openness in Ofili's work the result of the tendentious critical conjunctions beloved of postmodernists. He is no appropriationist. Rather, he is fluent in these cultures -- in everything from the Last Poets to William Blake, from Shaft to Picabia. His diversity is therefore something closer to multi-lingual resourcefulness. What makes Ofili's work exemplary is the grace - and sheer enjoyment - with which he combines and identifies himself with these heritages. There is no overarching measure of what is worthwhile for this project, no pc guidelines or postmodernist agendas. <sup>182</sup>

Both in the case of Chris Ofili and in the case of Steve McQueen, there is broad agreement among the critics that it is important to view the work in the context of black art. But black art is not a genre; as I have argued previously, while different examples of black art might have common purposes in terms of political and social agenda, they do not share a common set of conventions of the kind one might associate with slapstick comedy or crime fiction. Moreover, they work in entirely different media; McQueen creates film installations and Ofili paints pictures. Carroll himself, in rejecting Beardsley's proposed General Canons, has dismissed the idea that it would be possible to use the same criteria to appraise works in such very different disciplines.

Clearly the reviewers see black art as a highly significant context within which to appraise the work, of both Chris Ofili and Steve McQueen, notwithstanding the obvious fact that they are working in entirely different disciplines, using different media and adopting very different artistic approaches. The category of black art embraces a range of different disciplines, including visual arts, film, theatre, dance, literature and music. It is entirely legitimate for critics to consider the work of the painter Ofili and the filmmaker McQueen in the context of black art, just as we might consider examples of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, painting and music in the context of romanticism. But it is important

<sup>182</sup> Dave Beech 'Chris Ofili' *Art Monthly* no217 31-3 June1998

to note that what brings these two artists together into the same contextual framework is not how their work is made, nor how it looks, nor their adherence to a common set of conventions, but what their work is about.

## 5. But What Does it Mean?

While generally in sympathy with Carroll's wish to establish an argument for criticism as a reason-based activity, I have criticised his solution to the problem of critical reasons on a number of grounds. I have agreed with Sibley regarding the reversibility of positively valenced terms. I have argued that Carroll has smuggled terms involving evaluative judgement into the premise of an argument that purportedly contains only simple factual description. I have also suggested that his conception of genre is too rigid to afford the critic an evaluative framework for art works that are not compliantly generic.

However, one recurring criticism has been that Carroll has underplayed the importance of meaning within those isolated elements that he wishes to claim are invariably 'good-making' features of a work within a specified genre. In both the example of suggested narrative in contemporary dance and the example of pratfalls in slapstick comedy, I have argued that Carroll fails to take account of the importance of the perceived meaning of that element when viewed in the context of the work as a whole. Having said that, Carroll's position is far removed from formalism and he acknowledges this in comments throughout *On Criticism*. In particular he describes the ideal critic, or as he calls it a 'critic-in-full':

A good critic should be a master of the history and categories of the artform about which she has elected to specialize. She should be an art critic, narrowly construed. However that is not enough. She should be also a cultural critic. For the arts are not hermetically sealed enterprises. The arts are among the major conduits for the ideas, beliefs and feelings that form the warp and woof<sup>183</sup> of a living culture. This is as much a part of the function of the arts as is the solution of the problems that beset the individual practices of the arts.<sup>184</sup>

While Carroll is sceptical about any project to formulate general principles for art, he is sanguine here about asserting the social purpose of the arts in general and this is a theme he touches upon throughout the book. If one of

<sup>183</sup> What in the UK we call the weft

<sup>184</sup> Carroll p196

the things we find valuable about the arts in general is their ability to communicate ideas, beliefs and feelings, 'the warp and woof of a living culture', then we might expect to see that function of signification evaluated within the reviews of individual art works. This brings us into the area of discussing what bearing the *meaning* of a work has (or should have) on the critic's evaluation of the work.

We first need to make clear what we mean by *meaning*. I would like to start by differentiating *meaning* from *message*. We have already seen instances where it is clear that the critic's evaluation is based in part on their reading of what the work means. For example, in reviews that praised the work of Chris Ofili we have seen critics link that appraisal to the artist's perceived success in articulating the black experience and challenging stereotypical images of ethnicity. But although, through analysis of the pictorial references, the critic is able to interpret a certain Ofili painting as being concerned with certain issues of culture, politics and identity, that is not the same as saying that the painting has a message.

However, in Ofili's Turner Prize exhibition, there was an example of one of his paintings that clearly had a *message*. In his review of the exhibition, Dan Glaister made the distinction between meaning and message clear. Glaister sees Ofili as an artist who eschews explicit messages in his work:

unlike an earlier generation of black artists in Britain, he is not interested in the polemics of political correctness, preferring beguilement and a self-consciously over-the-top exoticism to outright political statement.

However, turning to one of the most discussed of Ofili's paintings that year, Glaister made it clear that *No Woman No Cry* was the exception to that general rule:

Nevertheless, his painting *No Woman No Cry* (the title of which is taken from the Bob Marley song) in the Turner Prize show is a portrait of a woman shedding tears, and in each tear is a tiny portrait of black murder victim Stephen Lawrence. The painting is

dedicated to Lawrence's mother. The words 'No Woman No Cry' are picked-out in coloured pins stuck into the balls of dung at the painting's feet.<sup>185</sup>

Glaister made it clear that in the case of *No Woman No Cry*, Ofili's painting had a clear message. However, he makes it equally clear that the idea of a message does not fit well with the majority of Ofili's work. Certainly, his work is *about* something and the reviewers discuss the iconographic cultural references within the paintings, but it would be wrong to say of the majority of his paintings that they have a *message* any more than the paintings of Tomma Abts have a message. Nevertheless, the critics still discuss his work (and the work of Abts) in one way or another, in terms of its meaning, its significance, of what the paintings are *saying*.

To think of the meaning of the artwork purely in terms of a *message* is to risk opening up a binary opposition between form and content that I will argue is unwarranted. In *On Criticism*, Carroll points out that it is quite possible to separate our judgements about the aesthetic value of an art work and our agreement or otherwise with the *message* of that art work. He cites Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* and Eisenstein's *The Old and the New* as examples:

Though I am both an atheist with respect to the Christ and an anti-Stalinist with respect to Soviet collectivisation, I can acknowledge that both films possess artistic value. That the films are at odds ideologically with each other as well as at odds with my political convictions indicates that my evaluations are based on something other than politics.<sup>186</sup>

However, to say that one's judgement of an art work is not determined by one's agreement with the *message* of the art work is not to say that *meaning* in the artwork is therefore irrelevant to evaluation. To differentiate between the *message* of a work and what I am calling the *meaning* in a work is not a straightforward task and will involve taking an apparent detour through a very broad brush sketch of earlier modes of art criticism.

<sup>185</sup> Glaister 1998

<sup>186</sup> *On Criticism* p38

There was a time when the art reviewer typically dealt with questions of form and content in discrete categories. The Victorian art critic reviewing the entries to the annual Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, would often spend the main part of any review discussing what the scenes depicted, praising messages therein that encouraged moral behaviour, religious devotion or national pride and deploring those that smacked of vulgarity or decadence. Only after the critic had discussed those issues might the style of depiction and formal elements of the work then be summed up in a few words.

The above is, of course, generalisation and I will mention one notable exception in the final chapter. But, in the same way that I make that very rough characterisation of 19<sup>th</sup> century art reviewing, I make similarly broad characterisation of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist critical practice as being animated by the opposite tendency: to regard the ostensible subject of a painting as merely a pretext for the creation and manipulation of form. However, by the end of the century, formalist approaches had ceased to be dominant and critical theory and critical practice, informed by sociological thought, focussed once more on the interpretation of the meanings of artworks, albeit in a radically different way that paid attention as much to their unwitting testimonies as to their subject matter. Writing in 2000, Carroll<sup>187</sup> noted a renewed interest in aesthetics and characterised it as a corrective to this interpretative approach to criticism, as that approach had once acted as a corrective to formalism, and it is tempting to see this as a kind of tug-of-war between those who wish to concentrate on form and those who wish to concentrate on content. But, in fact, these positions are quite distinct; the concept of the meaning of a painting would be very different to a modern critic engaged in semiotic analysis than it would have been to an art critic of the Victorian era.

If the last few decades have been marked out by this critical bias towards interpretation, that tendency has mirrored, he argues, tendencies in art practice that have also elevated meaning over aesthetics:

<sup>187</sup> Carroll 2000

From conceptual art, with its anti-aesthetic animus, to the enigmatic word/image configurations of so much recent installation art, today's artworld seems obsessed with messages, often messages of a stridently political cast.<sup>188</sup>

We can see evidence of the legacy of this contest of critical approaches in Carroll's recent writings on aesthetics. In *Art and the Domain of the Aesthetic*, he discusses aesthetic experience and rejects the notion that it exists in a single essential form. He instead argues for an 'enumerative' approach, which recognises different modes of aesthetic experience and he then goes on to list various such modes. He acknowledges that his list of modes reflects that assumption of separability of 'form' and 'content', noting:

I have not included the interpretation of meaning on my list because the tradition is somewhat in conflict on this matter: some regard meaning as an antipode of aesthetic experience, while others include it.<sup>189</sup>

Carroll does not align himself here with those who 'regard meaning as an antipode of aesthetic experience', but his ambivalence on this point suggests that, while he may be open to the possibility of bolting meaning onto his set of modes of aesthetic experience, he surely does not see as it central or essential. In the next sections I want to look at two ways in which meaning and aesthetic experience can be seen as closely bound together, two points where form and content meet. In the first, drawing on Susanne Langer's concept of symbolic transformation, I will look at ways that form could be said to generate meaning. In the second, I will look at ways in which knowledge changes our aesthetic response to form.

### *Abstraction and Symbolism*

In his review of Tomma Abts, Adrian Searle asks the question, 'What is Abts painting, and what do her paintings allude to?' This is a perfectly reasonable question. If you said that you were writing a novel, I might ask, "what is it

<sup>188</sup> Carroll 2000 p191

<sup>189</sup> Carroll 2000 p207

about?’ In the same way, if you said you had painted a picture, I might ask, “what is it of?”

In the case of Tomma Abts it would be difficult to answer that question. Tomma Abts’ pieces are paintings but it does not follow that they are pictures. They do not depict or appear to represent external objects. Until the arrival of modernist abstraction in the twentieth century, a standard feature (to use Walton’s term) of a painting was that it was a picture *of* something. Modernist practice, and the critical commentaries that accompanied its development, drew attention away from the representational function of paintings and towards their existence as objects in their own right.

If Abts’ paintings are to be considered as objects in their own right, if Rachel Campbell-Johnson is right in saying that they are ‘based on nothing in the real world’, then that prompts the question, to what extent it is reasonable to claim that they are meaningful, that they say something. If we use the word abstract simply to mean non-figurative then Abts paintings are abstract, they do not include any recognisable objects, only arrangements of form and colour.

However, it is clear from the reviews that, even if the paintings are not picturing external objects, the forms and colours in her paintings provoke associations not only with other works of art, but with a wide variety of everyday visual experiences. Abts herself argues that no painting is ever entirely abstract.<sup>190</sup> The wealth of metaphors used by the reviewers testifies to the range of connections between the arrangements of form and colour, and things in ‘the real world’. There was agreement between reviewers, for example, that darker shaded areas within the paintings produced the effect of shadow and that those implied shadows created the effect of shallow three-dimensional space.

Moreover, we have seen agreement amongst the reviewers that, notwithstanding their abstract nature, the paintings convey a quality of

<sup>190</sup> Cumming, *Observer* Sunday 17 November 2013

*reticence*. The critics mention a number of formal and contextual elements that contribute to that sense of reticence. They point to the use of muted colours, the evidence of meticulous working and reworking of surfaces, and those elements are contrasted with the bright colour and free flowing improvisational quality typical of abstract expressionist painting, such as the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock.

If the critics agree in characterising Tomma Abts' paintings as reticent, they interpret that reticence in different ways, as reserve, or as coldness or timidity. We may differ when forming an opinion of a person in the same way. We meet someone in company and we notice that she says little and sits on the sidelines. Her behaviour might variously be interpreted as self-contained and composed, shy, haughty and so on. If we wanted to make a judgement about which was the correct interpretation we would consider a number of factors, both in terms of our direct sensory impressions, and in terms of contextual factors.

Certainly we would also want to consider the context. If we know the person, we might compare her behaviour with how she behaves on other occasions. We might also consider her role and status within the company. We might know of particular sets of circumstances that might make her feel superior to the rest of the group or, alternatively, feel unsure of herself. In the same way, the critics examined the context of Abts' paintings and drew conclusions from that evidence.

However, the other way we might try to make a judgement about the reticence of a person is by direct and careful observation. A simple verbal descriptive account of someone saying little and sitting on the sidelines would not be enough to decide whether the cause was reserve or disdainfulness. To gain more insight we might observe nuances of body language and voice. Subtle and fleeting facial expressions might give clues to nervousness or hostility. However, to describe verbally *how* a particular expression of the eye or movement of the head conveyed some inner nature would be difficult to achieve unless one resorted to metaphor. One of the traditional skills of the

artist, still highly valued in photography, is that of being able to capture in a single image some fleeting expression that seems to capture an inner character that might take a novel to convey in words. The notion that verbal language might be less well fitted to the task of conveying certain aspects of human experience than other means, such as music or visual art, is at the heart of Susanne Langer's approach to this question.

A central starting point for Langer is the observation that a defining characteristic of our species is that we are intensely interested in creating and interpreting symbols. That characteristic has played its part in our success and survival as a species, its reach and sophistication extended by the discursive symbolic systems of language and mathematics. Creating and interpreting symbols is a fundamental human need and is a constant activity in the conscious, but also the unconscious mind; we see faces in the clouds, heroes in the constellations, our fate in tea leaves.

Langer distinguishes two forms of symbolism: discursive symbolism, which includes language and mathematics; and what she calls presentational symbolism. It is important to understand that Langer's concept of the discursive symbolism of language and mathematics is strongly influenced by logical positivism and, in particular, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (she introduces the idea of symbolic transformation in *Philosophy in a New Key*, first published 1942, before the publication of *Philosophical Investigations*). It is within that context that she notes that the activity of the mind, beyond that which can be contained within sets of propositions, is sometimes dismissed as 'mere' feeling or sensations; she notes Carnap's description of language, which does not meet these rigorous new standards, as a kind of expressive noise-making (in which category he places both phrases such as 'Oh ah' and lyric poetry).<sup>191</sup> But Langer argues that mental activity that cannot find expression through discursive symbolism does so by other means:

What discursive symbolism —language in its literal use —does for our awareness of things about us and our own relation to them, the

<sup>191</sup> Langer 1942 p84

arts do for our awareness of subjective reality, feeling and emotion; they give inward experiences form and thus make them conceivable. The only way we can really envisage vital movement, the stirring and growth and passage of emotion, and ultimately the whole direct sense of human life, is in artistic terms.<sup>192</sup>

Langer points to the function of presentational symbolism as a means to convey those (often vital) aspects of human experience that cannot be fully conveyed as a set of linguistic propositions. If we take, as an example, a person who has suffered bereavement, his situation can be described using all the language tools that have been developed within the disciplines of medicine, psychology and the social sciences, but to express the lived experience of bereavement requires something more. Poetry and metaphor are the means by which language attempts to convey the experience of living with bereavement, but, equally, it finds expression through music and the visual arts. For Langer, the arts (and ritual) are the means to express 'whereof we cannot speak.' Langer proposes that the way in which the arts do this is through presentational symbolism, which she argues is systematic but non-discursive. Her clearest and most persuasive example of systematic non-discursive symbolism is music and her discussion of music occupies a central place in *Philosophy in a New Key*.

The model of music might be a good starting place in trying to understand how the paintings of Tomma Abts might convey reticence. Music can be both abstract and systematic; it is not unusual to speak loosely about 'the language of music'. Deryck Cooke's<sup>193</sup> book of that name provides a meticulous analysis of the way in which specific harmonic and melodic forms within western tonal music convey particular emotional colours. Moreover, any film composer knows that it is possible to affect the emotions of an audience by using established techniques to manipulate parameters such as dynamics harmony and rhythm. The success of these techniques does not require the audience to consciously read and de-code the music. We do not need to say to ourselves 'here the theme recurs in a minor key – that denotes impending tragedy'. We recognise the emotional import of the music at a subliminal

<sup>192</sup> Susanne K. Langer *Problems of Art* (New York: Scribners) 1957 p74

<sup>193</sup> *The Language of Music* 1952

level; it is quite possible for a filmgoer to be affected by the music soundtrack while knowing nothing at all about music theory.

Tomma Abts was one of the artists featured in a recent exhibition at the Tate, *Painting Now: Five Contemporary Artists*. Laura Cumming's review of the exhibition included the claim, 'Abts is inventing a new pictorial language entirely of her own'.<sup>194</sup> Langer would be clear that she is not; the presentational symbolism of the visual arts does not work in the same way as a language:

Since we have no words, there can be no dictionary of meanings for lines, shadings, or other elements of pictorial techniques. We may well pick out some line, say a certain curve, in a picture, which serves to represent one nameable item; but in another place the same curve would have an entirely different meaning. It has no fixed meaning apart from its context. Also there is no complex of other elements that is equivalent to it at all times, as '2 + 2' is equivalent to '4'. Non-discursive symbols cannot be defined in terms of others, as discursive symbols can.<sup>195</sup>

But although presentational symbolism lacks the degree of stability of meaning enjoyed by language, it nonetheless operates within a shared visual culture. If the non-discursive symbolism of muted colour conveys a quality of reticence in the paintings of Tomma Abts, it does so by virtue of the interconnection of two contexts: the specific context of the painting itself, and the wider context of a visual culture that is shared by those who view it.

The first of these two contexts is the specific context in which the use of colour occurs. The critics classify Tomma Abts' paintings in terms of their relationship to modernist abstraction, which invites us to make comparisons to the paintings of Pollock, Kandinsky, Rothko and Mondrian, which are notable for their use of intense colour. The use of colour in Abts' paintings is undoubtedly muted in comparison to those paintings. In another context, for example, fifteenth century Japanese landscape paintings, many of the colours that she uses in her paintings would seem excessively bright. The critics

<sup>194</sup> *Observer* 17 November 2013

<sup>195</sup> Langer 1942 p95

identify the colours as muted because they see the paintings within the context of an art tradition noted for its bold use of colour.

The second and wider context is the culture of the viewer, in which not only is there general agreement about which colours are correctly described as loud or brash, and which are correctly described as subdued or muted, there is also general recognition about what those terms mean when applied to human character and to psychological states. The terms loud or muted are terms whose first order meanings are to do with sound; that are themselves faded metaphors when used either with respect to colour, as they are with respect to character, but, for example, in a mainstream commercial film we would instantly recognise the stereotype of the extrovert in a loud shirt, or the introvert dressed in quiet subdued tones. In fact, I will argue that the connection is so fully assimilated into our way of seeing the world, that we read characters in that way even when we do not consciously recognise the way in which colour is influencing our view, in exactly the way we take subliminal cues from film music. The association between colour and characterisation is deeply embedded; our fashion and marketing industries rely upon that fact.

What Cumming calls a pictorial language would not satisfy the standards Langer sets for language, but Cumming's comment indicates her view that some systematic process of signification is being developed within the body of work. The way in which that system of signification works may, to an extent, be inter-subjective (as evidenced by the critics' agreement over the quality of 'reticence'), but it is not capable of being 'translated' into a set of discursive formulations. Nor can the elements that may have been used to signify a quality like reticence, for example, Abts use of muted colour, be isolated and used in the same way in a different context. Many such elements may work within the painting but for Langer the artwork itself in its entirety is a single indivisible symbol.

On the final page of *On Criticism*, Carroll argues for the value of the arts on the grounds that they transmit the 'ideas, beliefs and feelings that form the

warp and woof of a living culture'. However, despite recognising its value for the arts as a whole, that capacity for transmitting ideas, beliefs and feelings does not figure strongly in his discussion of the evaluation of individual artworks. Carroll's use of the metaphor of the 'warp and woof of a living culture' echoes the language of Susanne Langer. In Langer's metaphor, those two interwoven sets of strands are identified as, on the one hand, that part of human existence that can be understood in discursive form as a set of propositions, and on the other, symbolism in all of its forms, including the non-discursive symbolism that is characteristic of the arts:

The modern mind is an incredible complex of impressions and transformations; and its product is a fabric of meanings that would make the most elaborate dream of the most ambitious tapestry-weaver look like a mat. The warp of that fabric consists of what we call "data", the signs to which experience has conditioned us to attend, and upon which we act often without any conscious ideation. The woof is symbolism. Out of signs and symbols we weave our tissue of "reality".<sup>196</sup>

It is Langer's notion of symbolism<sup>197</sup> as being woven into one's lived reality by which she calls into question persistent dichotomies within art critical traditions: between the aesthetic and the semiotic, the perceptual and the cognitive, form and content, interpretation and evaluation.

### *Beauty and Rubbish*

Langer suggests ways in which even abstract visual forms such as those described in reviews of the paintings of Tomma Abts can signify meaning to the viewer in the same way as abstract musical forms communicate states of emotion to the listener. In this section, I will look at another point where questions of meaning and aesthetic quality are bound together, by examining the way in which the meaning or significance of an object affects direct aesthetic judgement. The particular aesthetic quality we will consider is one

<sup>196</sup> Langer p280

<sup>197</sup> It should be noted that Langer does use the terms sign and symbol in the exactly same way the terms are commonly used in modern semiotics.

that some writers<sup>198</sup> would say has been scandalously neglected in the discussion so far: the quality of beauty.

Writers like Roger Scruton<sup>199</sup> and Anthony O'Hear<sup>200</sup> have argued that art took a wrong turning in the twentieth century, losing sight of its central purpose in its retreat from, or rejection of, beauty. The biologist Steven Pinker<sup>201</sup> has made similar claims based on what he sees as the evolutionary function of human aesthetic sensitivity. For those who regret the decentering of beauty from visual art, the Turner Prize is often seen as the apotheosis of this tendency, and one factor that has particularly caused champions of beauty to despair has been the tendency of nominated artists to use detritus in their work. Emin and Ofili we have already mentioned but quite a number of Turner Prize artists have used rubbish to produce their work, including Rebecca Warren, Tony Cragg, Mike Nelson and Tomoko Takahashi.

In 'Aesthetic Judgements', Sibley considered the question of whether rubbish can be beautiful, taking as his starting point a thought experiment from a book by the art critic Eric Newton:

A meadow of lush grass generously interspersed with buttercups and ox-eye daisies usually strikes one as beautiful. But what if on entering the meadow one were to discover that the buttercups were empty Gold Flake packets and the daisies torn up scraps of paper? One would protest to oneself in vain that litter and wild flowers can be equally pleasing to the eye, but despite one's attempts to preserve one's aesthetic judgments intact, one's attitude to the meadow would alter and the alteration could only be expressed in terms of disappointment.<sup>202</sup>

Sibley considers a number of factors that might account for this. One possible cause of Newton's problem is that the knowledge of the source of the colour in the meadow has made him 'switch off aesthetically'<sup>203</sup>, because of the associations of disgust that come with the knowledge that what he was seeing

<sup>199</sup> *Beauty* 2009

<sup>200</sup> *Prospects for Beauty*. 2001

<sup>201</sup> *The Blank Slate* 2002

<sup>202</sup> Newton p54

<sup>203</sup> Sibley p184

was litter and not flowers. He gives the example of someone who had a morbid fear of snakes being unable to notice the beauty of the animal's markings. However, Sibley does not, in the end, believe that disgust has blocked Newton's aesthetic response to the colours; on the contrary, he sees Newton's second response, of disappointment after learning the true source of the meadow's colours, as every bit as much an aesthetic response as his initial judgement of beauty.

Sibley extends the thought experiment to eliminate the possibility that a feeling of disgust caused by the unsavoury presence of litter has caused Newton to 'switch off aesthetically'. He imagines that, rather than litter, the source of the colours in the meadow were artificial flowers made of plastic or silk. Newton, he argues, would feel much the same sense of disappointment: that, although the 'visual beauty' might be unchanged, one would suffer the loss of the associations of growth, life and nature connected with some 'norm or ideal of meadow-beauty'<sup>204</sup>. He does not accept that to experience beauty is to experience a purely visual phenomenon. The associations connected with those visual experiences, the play of the imagination that they provoke, are also part of experiencing beauty:

If judgements of beauty springing from these sources seem too far ranging to fall within some narrowly circumscribed category of aesthetic judgements, appreciations responses and rejoicings, I do not know into what obvious broader category they fall. To outlaw them by some restrictive stipulation or decision would itself demand reasons and arguments.<sup>205</sup>

Sibley gently mocks Newton's apparent confusion on this point ('Can we throw light on his hesitations, puzzlements and conflicts?'<sup>206</sup>) but, in fact, when Newton returns to the thought experiment later in his book, the conclusion he reaches is not far removed from Sibley's position:

It follows that 'association' plays its part in our sense of beauty, not only on the outer levels of a work of art, but on every level. What

<sup>204</sup> Sibley p187

<sup>205</sup> Sibley p188

<sup>206</sup> Sibley p184

has already been said about associational beauty in Nature still applies. The green field patterned with yellow and white spots is more beautiful if the spots are buttercups and daisies than if they are empty cigarette packets and torn-up newspaper. But it is only in the light of our pleasant memories of flowers and our painful memories of litter that the meadow becomes more or less beautiful.<sup>207</sup>

Of course Newton's problem of the meadow concerns not the evaluation of a landscape painting, but the aesthetic appreciation of landscape. Scruton has argued that, 'our sense of the beauty of an object is always dependent on a conception of that object.'<sup>208</sup> He uses the example of features that would be regarded as beautiful in a horse, but would be regarded as ugly in a man. Sibley goes some way towards agreeing with Scruton about beauty being an attributive quality in such cases, although he does not agree this must universally apply in all circumstances. Nonetheless, as Sibley points out, the problem of the meadow underlines the point that, where we do have knowledge about the object in our view, the meaningful aspects of that experience are inescapably relevant to our evaluation of its aesthetic qualities. This opens up important questions about the nature of the relationship between perception and cognition in aesthetic appreciation. We can illustrate the issue by extending Newton's thought experiment still further; suppose that, when looking at the flowers in the meadow, we discovered not that they were in fact litter, but that they were a very rare species of wildflower, perhaps the last surviving examples of their kind. We might feel that our appreciation of their beauty was made more intense by that knowledge (this question parallels the longstanding philosophical debate about the value of fake artworks that I will not enter into here) and a number of Turner Prize works seem to have been designed to test that balance between perception and cognition.

Simon Starling's *Shedboatshed* is an example of an artwork that presents an everyday object, a wooden shed, not normally seen as a candidate for artistic appreciation. It is the story of the shed that makes it remarkable. For

<sup>207</sup> Newton p118

<sup>208</sup> Scruton

Rachael Campbell-Johnson, that contextual knowledge is enough to imbue the shed with the power to provoke a play of imagination in the mind of the viewer:

Who stepping into Simon Starling's Shedboatshed, cannot relate to that dream of sailing off into the sunset, or to its flip side, retirement to the allotment shed? The ramshackle structure that greets you as you enter the galleries stands as a metaphor for art itself; a refuge for imagination and dreams.<sup>209</sup>

Adrian Searle was not so convinced. For him the story of the shed, the associations of ideas that its journey might provoke, failed to counterweight the banality of the object itself:

That Simon Starling has won the Turner prize has a sort of dull inevitability about it. His work was in its way the least satisfying installation in the show, mostly because his art is less about the things in the gallery than about how these objects came to be there in the first place. ... The stories behind these objects are absurdist, Quixotic errands. Reading about his journeys, and how his works evolve, is more satisfying than the things he makes, whose status is largely as evidence.<sup>210</sup>

Searle's comment differentiates Starling's art from the objects in the gallery. The art is actually the work of making the piece rather than the physical outcome of that work. This is an important distinction that echoes Collingwood's idea of the artwork as an ideal object. If the artwork, *Shedboatshed* is a process rather than an object, then what the critic must pay attention to is the evidence of that process as provided by the artist. That would include not only the shed itself, but also Starling's photographic record of each stage of the shed's journey and the contextual information about the shed's origin and transformations. These objects connect the viewer to the artwork in the way that holy relics connect the faithful to the life of a saint. Searle acknowledges that the 'artwork' as a whole offers some satisfaction, but it does not, for him, imbue his encounter with the object itself with any greater intensity. To relate Searle's response to my extended version of

<sup>209</sup> Campbell-Johnston 18 October 2005

<sup>210</sup> Searle 6 December 2005

Newton's problem of the meadow, the knowledge that the wildflowers are rare and endangered may increase our intellectual interest in them, or even heighten our emotional response to them, but need not necessarily make them appear more beautiful.

Searle has another critique of *Shedboatshed*, one that he might apply more generally to artworks that depend so heavily on context. It is that, in the nature of this kind of work, the carefully selected contextual information provided by the artist is only one contextual framework, another is the institutional context of the art world and the two frameworks may not always harmonise:

Back-story is everything in Simon Starling's work, and his *Shedboatshed* (Mobile Architecture No 2) has another story the artist doesn't tell us. Eventually bought by the Kunstmuseum in Basel, *Shedboatshed* was presumably dismantled in Switzerland, its parts numbered, padded, crated and then transported to Tate Britain in a big truck, where the piece was put back together again. Much care, presumably, was taken not to disturb the desiccated scraps of ivy clinging to its exterior wall, and in the placement of the odds and ends that lie about in its dim interior. But this story, of the passage of an artwork, stays untold.<sup>211</sup>

If the 'back story' of the shed, as many reviewers felt, was about sustainability and adaptability, a makeshift vessel on a quixotic journey, then the story of *Shedboatshed* as a Turner Prize exhibit is a different one, and one that has been effectively edited out of the installation. For Searle, his knowledge of this hidden back story works to undermine the sense of authenticity and the earnestness of intent that might otherwise have been a positive feature of the artwork, in the same way as Newton's appreciation of the meadow's colour is undermined by the knowledge that he is seeing litter and not flowers.

There are two important things to note about Newton's thought experiment. Firstly, it is worth re-iterating that it does not involve the appreciation of beauty in art, but the appreciation of beauty in nature. The presence of litter in a meadow may offend aesthetically, but we may also be offended by the sight

<sup>211</sup> Searle 18 October 2005

for other reasons, as evidence of the despoiling of the natural environment, or of the antisocial behaviour of some of our fellow citizens. Secondly, Sibley does not say that empty cigarette packets and torn-up newspaper cannot be considered beautiful, only that they do not add to the beauty of a meadow. In fact, he gives many examples of cases in which artists have made use of a material not normally considered a candidate for aesthetic appreciation and placed it a different context:

People often say beauty can be found in the most unlikely things if one has eyes to see it. Often, they say, the artist sees, and helps us see, beauty we ordinarily miss, so broadening our potentialities for appreciation. Rembrandt's painted side of beef draws attention to its rich and varied colouration. Ruskin said somewhere that Turner could open our eyes to beauty, presumably of line, colour, iridescence etc. in rotting vegetation, rubbish, garbage. Modern artists have forced us to notice beauties of coloration, texture, shape in rusting metal and battered tin cans by painting them, incorporating them in abstract sculptures or simply exhibiting them.<sup>212</sup>

One artist who makes her work by exhibiting rubbish is Tomoko Takahashi. Her large scale installations are typically composed of obsolete products and discarded waste. Many reviewers saw her work as primarily polemic in nature, and discussed it in terms of its meanings or messages, rather than discussing it in terms of its beauty. Those reviewers whose tendency was to see the Turner Prize as emblematic of a regrettable retreat from traditional aesthetic values were predictably critical or dismissive of the work; Brian Sewell said of it "It looks like she has robbed a gang of bag ladies and emptied the contents of the bags all over the floor."<sup>213</sup>

If those reviewers whose tendency is to look for beauty in artwork were disappointed by Takahashi, those whose tendency is to look for ideological content found much to write about. Paul Mitchell reviewing her Turner Prize show *Learning How to Drive* on the website of the International Committee of the Fourth International introduced the artist thus:

<sup>212</sup> Sibley p184

<sup>213</sup> "Turner finalists paint a picture of controversy" *Daily Telegraph* 15 June

She has lived through the economic rise and stagnation of Japan and the development of its obsessive consumerism and human alienation. She explores how consumer objects that are replaced as soon as new models are marketed can live again and how individualism relies on social activity.<sup>214</sup>

Although ostensibly (according to the title, but also the artist herself) Takahashi's Turner Prize installation was inspired by her attempt to pass her driving test, Mitchell saw a wider political meaning to the work:

Discarded maps, signs, lights and maintenance tools are piled high. Here and there you spot a police driver's manual or a heap of children's model car racing track. You gradually begin to realise how an apparently simple activity is a really quite a complex social one.<sup>215</sup>

Julian Stallabrass, who included Takahashi's work in his overview of contemporary political art, connected her work with the ideas of curator and theorist Nicholas Bourriaud, who developed the label of "relational aesthetics" to describe art which acts to ameliorate the social rifts caused by capitalism.

*Socialism Today* noted the element of the work challenging the institutional limits of the gallery space itself (a frequent feature of installation art that we will look at more closely in the next chapter):

Evidently, she was taken aback by the amount of rules governing museums: health and safety rules on the circulation of visitors, fire regulations, and so on. So traffic signs giving directions are incorporated in the design. A young child's school uniforms are present, alongside an old security guard's uniform: lifelong rules and regulations.<sup>216</sup>

This reading of Takahashi's installation, as offering a challenge to the space that hosts it, may have been informed by awareness of the artist's wider body of work. Andrew Graham-Dixon referred in his review to one of the Takahashi's earlier pieces:

<sup>214</sup> Mitchell 2000

<sup>215</sup> Mitchell 2000

<sup>216</sup> Thain 2000

1997 also saw the creation of *Company Deal*, a work in which Takahashi was allowed to flood a London marketing consultancy's office with six weeks' worth of its own, accumulated waste, mouldy pizza boxes and all – difficult not to see *that* as some kind of statement about market-led, consumer-capitalist society<sup>217</sup>

Nicci Gerrard also interprets Takahashi's work as a critique of consumer capitalism. She describes the artist's work as:

making a puritanical point about our high-speed, hi-tech age: all these things are useless and worthless, though they still function. How quickly objects lose their value; what a litter of goods we leave in our postmodern wake.<sup>218</sup>

However, if the arrangements of rubbish that make up Takahashi's installations are simply meant to confront us with the appalling wastefulness of consumer capitalism, then one might assume that these heaps of debris might be intended to arouse feelings of disgust. But the reviews suggest that this is not so straightforward. Virginia Button, for example, says of Takahashi, 'She transforms reclaimed rubbish and detritus into crazy, complex and beautiful arrangements.'<sup>219</sup> Nicci Gerrard agrees with that judgement of beauty, describing the accumulated objects that make up a Takahashi installation as 'weirdly beautiful in their dereliction'.<sup>220</sup>

Graham-Dixon too suggests that there is more to Tomoko Takahashi's work than the political dimension. He uses statements made by the artist herself as evidence to argue that her installations are shaped by her intense interest in the aesthetics of her work:

Takahashi has tended to play down any suggestion of polemical intent, describing herself as a creator of "designer disorder" and comparing her intricate arrangements of obsolete tat to "abstract paintings or broken sentences." Her work is also, she has said, "very much like a landscape: a friend of mine says like a gardener."<sup>221</sup>

<sup>217</sup> Graham-Dixon November 1999

<sup>218</sup> Gerrard January 1999

<sup>219</sup> Button p128

<sup>220</sup> Gerrard January 1999

<sup>221</sup> Graham-Dixon November 1999

He suggests that Takahashi's work shows the influence of Dadaist, Kurt Schwitters, who, in the mid-twentieth century, developed an individual style, which he called Merz. His Merz work mixed painting with collage, using items one would normally discard, such as used bus tickets and fragments of newsprint. Schwitters' work, often political in its references, showed careful consideration of the formal concerns of colour, line, shape and composition.

Of course there is no necessary contradiction involved in an artist having a desire to pursue a political agenda in her work and at the same time being intensely concerned with the aesthetic qualities of the work. But Andrew Graham-Dixon points to an aspect of Takahashi's work that brings together the ideological and the aesthetic, not as two parallel agendas operating within the work, but as a single unified whole. He refers to the fact that Takahashi's work often challenges the institution that hosts it. He describes the process by which the artist created her installation in the New Neurotic Realism at the Saatchi Gallery, which was the exhibition that led to Takahashi's Turner Prize nomination. His account highlights a clash of aesthetic values between the artist and the environment within which she was operating, the huge exhibition space that had been created in London by wealthy art collector Charles Saatchi:

She lived in the gallery while she was making the piece, sleeping on a camp bed set up like an island in her sea of waste, overstock and broken bargain-basement consumer durables. "I didn't like the atmosphere there," she said later. "It's so abstract, clean and proper – a white cube that's so well done it's surreal. I was working counter to the space, trying to humanise it." Blatantly at odds with the architecture, Max Clifford's spare and dauntingly huge suite of interconnecting galleries, her work seemed to have invaded than simply occupied the space. It looked like the assertion of a messy truth. The world according to Takahashi is not neatness, order and purity but chaos, spillage, overflow.<sup>222</sup>

Graham-Dixon's review explores the connections between aesthetic and political values. By bringing her detritus into the antiseptic space of the classic modernist white cube exhibition space, he suggests, the artist is

<sup>222</sup> Graham-Dixon November 1999

inviting the audience to appreciate the aesthetics of the chaotic and marginal that would normally be edited out of the safe ordered environment of the modern art gallery. When Graham-Dixon describes Takahashi's work as 'the assertion of a messy truth', the unspoken corollary is that it asserts that messy truth in contrast to the neat and orderly fiction of the exhibition space. The artist herself has said, "Everything has its own life and I want to make things more themselves, to liberate them from imposed rules. Teetering on the edge between order and chaos, that's the exciting point—living is like that."<sup>223</sup> The aesthetic challenge and the critical edge offered by her work are not seen as separate agendas, but as different sides of the same coin.

Graham-Dixon's review of Takahashi's work deals with form and content as inseparable; aesthetics and ideology are unified in the 'the assertion of a messy truth'. This is not exceptional; across a range of reviews we can see other critics attempting to address questions about the significance of the work, at least partly, through formal analysis. The issue is one that is of concern to the reviewers; we have seen Starling criticised for what was seen as a tokenistic approach to form. We have seen some fretting over what Abts' abstract forms might be *saying*, and the attempt to read her paintings in terms of a dialogue with the concepts of twentieth century modernism.

What is clear is that questions of meaning tend to be found at the very heart of many critical reviews, not only when the critic is involved in interpretation, but also in support of evaluative statements. The evidence that both critics and the art-going public place meaning at the centre of their evaluative judgements can be seen throughout the commentaries. This can be seen most starkly in attacks on the Prize, both from outside the art world and within. Along with critiques about the flight from beauty, lack of craft skills, and the scandals concerning accusations of indecency or immorality levelled at Turner Prize art works, a frequently heard complaint is the one that the Stuckist, Charles Thompson levelled at Tomma Abts' paintings; that the work was meaningless.

<sup>223</sup> Mitchell

## *Form and Content*

At the start of this chapter I made some very sweeping generalisations about the developments in art criticism over the past two centuries. To summarise even more brutally, I argued then that the Victorian critic tended to focus on meaning at the expense of any discussion of form while the tendency of mid-twentieth century critical practice was to regard the formal aspects of the work as paramount and its subject as a mere pretext. I would argue that, on the evidence of reviews of the Turner Prize, critical practice in the twenty-first century is characterised by the attempt, not just to balance those two aspects, but to engage with them in a unified way.

Clearly, the critical tendencies of the past have, to a great extent, been affected by the kind of artworks that were being produced at the time; narrative paintings invite responses that are different from those we might have to abstract expressionist paintings. But it is also a two way process; the formalist approach developed by critics like Clive Bell and then Clement Greenberg, mirrored developing abstraction within art practice but it also underpinned and promoted that tendency.

To make amends for my generalisations about art critical practice I will look at a notable exception. The Stuckist manifesto dramatises what they see as a corruption of artistic standards with the statement, 'The only artist who wouldn't be in danger of winning The Turner Prize is Turner.'<sup>224</sup> The use of Turner's name has provided a battleground for critics and supporters of the Prize. While critics of the Prize use J M W Turner as an emblem of the aesthetic excellence they see as missing from contemporary art, supporters of the Prize point out how innovative and sometimes controversial Turner's work was considered to be in his own time. It was the wish to defend Turner against his critics and to explain the new approaches he was bringing to

<sup>224</sup> Thompson and Childish August 1999

painting that led to the writing, over a twenty year period, of the five volumes of *Modern Painters* by the art critic John Ruskin.

Ruskin does not conform to my caricature of the Victorian art critic. The fourth volume of *Modern Painters* provides a paradigm example of the critic dealing with form and meaning in a unified way. It also provides an excellent illustration of Sibley's notion of the critic as teacher and persuader. Ruskin makes a detailed comparison between two depictions of windmills, one by the noted contemporary picturesque painter Clarkson Stanfield, the other by Turner. In each case the windmill is a detail within a larger landscape painting. Ruskin's comparison notes the more obvious aesthetic appeal of Stanfield's style of painting:

At first sight I dare say the reader may like Stanfield's best; and there is, indeed, a great deal more in it to attract liking. Its roof is nearly as interesting in its ruggedness as a piece of the stony peak of a mountain, with a *châlet* built on its side; and it is exquisitely varied in swell and curve. Turner's roof, on the contrary, is a plain, ugly gable,—a windmill roof, and nothing more.<sup>225</sup>

As the comparison proceeds on to a detailed discussion of different parts of the windmills, Ruskin again points to the greater initial visual appeal of Stansfield's depiction, but a new note has entered the discussion:

Stanfield's sails are twisted into most effective wrecks, as beautiful as pine bridges over Alpine streams; only they do not look as if they had ever been serviceable windmill sails; they are bent about in cross and awkward ways, as if they were warped or cramped; and their timbers look heavier than necessary. Turner's sails have no beauty about them like that of Alpine bridges; but they have the exact switchy sway of the sail that is always straining against the wind; and the timbers form clearly the lightest possible framework for the canvas,—thus showing the essence of windmill sail.

The windmill sails, as Turner depicts them 'have no beauty about them' but Ruskin is beginning to suggest that they have more reality. Again, Ruskin praises Stansfield for the beauty of the clay walls he has depicted, but the critique is becoming more explicit:

<sup>225</sup> Ruskin ch1 par11

Then the clay wall of Stanfield's mill is as beautiful as a piece of chalk cliff, all worn into furrows by the rain, coated with mosses, and rooted to the ground by a heap of crumbled stone, embroidered with grass and creeping plants. But this is not a serviceable state for a windmill to be in.

Ruskin points out that for a windmill to be of any use it must be able to turn to face the wind and that Stansfield's picturesque depiction is of a windmill that would be incapable of doing so. He contrasts that depiction with that of Turner:

Now observe how completely Turner has chosen his mill so as to mark this great fact of windmill nature; how high he has set it; how slenderly he has supported it; how he has built it all of wood; how he has bent the lower planks so as to give the idea of the building lapping over the pivot on which it rests inside; and how, finally, he has insisted on the great leverage of the beam behind it, while Stanfield's lever looks more like a prop than a thing to turn the roof with. And he has done all this fearlessly, though none of these elements of form are pleasant ones in themselves, but tend, on the whole, to give a somewhat mean and spider-like look to the principal feature in his picture; and then, finally, because he could not get the windmill dissected, and show us the real heart and centre of the whole, behold, he has put a pair of old millstones, *lying outside*, at the bottom of it. These—the first cause and motive of all the fabric—laid at its foundation; and beside them the cart which is to fulfil the end of the fabric's being, and take home the sacks of flour.<sup>226</sup>

Turner has not sought to prettify the windmill; his depiction shows its true purpose and function. It is important to note that, in *Modern Painters*, Ruskin is trying to defend Turner against the charge that his paintings were not visually realistic, that they distorted reality. Ruskin argues that Turner is happy to sacrifice superficial picturesque beauty in order to achieve a more truthful rendition of his subject and he points to a higher aesthetic satisfaction than can be gained from Stansfield's rustic fantasy.

But Ruskin's assertion of the greater 'truth to nature' represented by Turner's work is not limited to the assertion that Turner's depiction of the windmill is

<sup>226</sup> Ruskin p12

more visually accurate than that of Stansfield. He points out the way in which Turner uses pictorial means to represent not only an accurate visual representation, but also one that offers the viewer an insight into the function, purpose, processes and inner workings of what he depicts. But Ruskin goes further still and asks us to consider not just the style of depiction, but what he calls the spirit in which it is depicted. Stansfield's approach, he argues, has a distinct lack of empathy about it:

Observe, that though all this ruin has befallen Stanfield's mill, Stanfield is not in the least sorry for it. On the contrary, he is delighted, and evidently thinks it the most fortunate thing possible. The owner is ruined, doubtless, or dead; but his mill forms an admirable object in our view of Brittany.<sup>227</sup>

By contrast, Ruskin argues, Turner's depiction of the windmill shows an understanding of the social and material reality of the human lives that were dependent on it:

Not so Turner. *His* mill is still serviceable; but, for all that, he feels somewhat pensive about it. It is a poor property, and evidently the owner of it has enough to do to get his own bread out from between its stones. Moreover, there is a dim type of all melancholy human labour in it, - catching the freewinds, and setting them to turn grindstones. ... Turning round a couple of stones, for the mere pulverization of human food, is not noble work for the winds. So, also, of all low labour to which one sets human souls. It is better than no labour; and, in a still higher degree, better than destructive wandering of imagination; but yet, that grinding in the darkness, for mere food's sake, must be melancholy work enough for many a living creature. All men have felt it so; and this grinding at the mill, whether it be breeze or soul that is set to it, we cannot much rejoice in. Turner has no joy of his mill.<sup>228</sup>

Ruskin's analysis of Turner's windmill points to the specificity of its depiction of a particular structure and its allusions to the reality of the lives connected with it, but it also points to the universal resonances provoked by the visual metaphor of the grindstones. If Stansfield has sacrificed truth to mere prettiness, Turner is praised for suggesting a real existence for the windmill,

<sup>227</sup> Ruskin p12

<sup>228</sup> Ruskin p13

offering a faithful depiction both of its mechanical functionality and the social reality of the labour that took place within it. Ruskin praises the technical skill with which Turner has depicted the motif, but in the end it is the sympathetic honesty of the depiction that separates Turner from Stansfield.

I do not offer this powerful instance of form and meaning being discussed in a unified way as a rebuke to modern critics. On the contrary, I offer it as an example, exceptional in its time, of Ruskin attempting to do what most modern critics attempt to do. Ruskin's close analysis was ultimately intended to justify his positive appraisal of aspects of Turner's work that some critics viewed negatively. Ruskin draws attention to the meaning of Turner's work in order to point out its aesthetic qualities and he points to the fine detail of the formal aspects of the work in order to elucidate the meaning. In doing so he sought not only to direct his readers' attention to positive features of the work, but also to induce them to reconsider some of their ideas about beauty and truth in painting. For Ruskin, the form and content of Turner's painting cannot be understood in isolation from each other.

There is a risk that those who are already convinced that meaning is relevant to evaluation may feel that, in this chapter, I have been needlessly labouring a point, while those of the opposite view may see my arguments as sketchy and far too brief to be convincing. Either way, we need to account for a disparity. In the reviews of artists like Ofili, Takahashi and Starling, critics routinely address questions about meaning and significance of the work in a way that places those issues at the centre of their evaluative judgements. In the account of evaluation that is offered by Carroll, questions of meaning seem to be peripheral at best. We can explain this disparity in one of two ways. Either Carroll is neglecting the question of meaning in his approach to evaluation, or the reviewers are at fault for being distracted from their central evaluative role. Those who are not persuaded by the arguments I have made or the examples I have given, and who believe that questions of meaning are irrelevant to evaluation, will see this disparity as evidence of poor critical practice. However, that is not a conclusion I would support. The critical focus on meaning is demanded by the nature of the work that they are reviewing. I

have offered the example of Ruskin as a model of evaluative analysis that takes account of meaning, but reviews of the work of Chris Ofili, Tomoko Takahashi and Simon Starling show that critics of our own time are also sensitive to the meaningful aspects of the artworks they review. All three artists produce work that the critics identify as having messages, meanings and references that relate to real and vital human issues outside the walls of the art gallery. That does not mean that their critical evaluations of those works are dependent on the degree of political agreement between the artist and the reviewer; the critics do not discuss the work in those terms. What it does mean is that the critics show an awareness that, in order to make a fair and valid appraisal of the artistic quality of the work, it is necessary to have an awareness of what it signifies.

## 6. Martin Creed: Ideas in an Empty Room

One of the challenges faced by professional art critics is that they must review art exhibitions of many different kinds, art from different periods or movements, art using a range of different media. One of the skills of the critic is to address each different kind of art in an appropriate way. The reviews of the non-figurative paintings of Tomma Abts paid close attention to the formal qualities of her work. Reviews of Chris Ofili's paintings made much of the pictorial references, the connotations or associations of ideas suggested by the images he depicts.

This chapter is devoted to an analysis of the critical and curatorial commentaries on the installation created by Martin Creed for the 2001 Turner Prize shortlist exhibition. Creed was awarded the Prize that year, but the work that he showed in that exhibition presented a particular challenge to the critics. In the gallery space that had been assigned to him, Creed exhibited a single piece entitled *Work No.227 The Lights Going On and Off*. The work consisted of the lights of the empty gallery space cycling between on and off every five seconds. Neither a formalist approach to criticism nor a decoding of pictorial references could gain much of a foothold on such a piece. The challenge for the critics was to review work whose formal qualities were so meagre at the same time as its subject matter was so elusive.

There is no exhibition by a shortlisted artist that generated a set of reviews in which the frustration felt by critics was more evident. They were divided in their evaluations of the piece and, more than a decade after it was exhibited in the Turner Prize exhibition, it still divides critical opinion. Waldemar Januszczak is scathing in his criticism:

One of the reasons I stopped attending student shows at Goldsmiths College is that I could not face seeing another blank wall presented as a radical exhibit by yet another copycat conceptualist. The worst winner of all time of the Turner prize was the tedious Martin Creed, in 2001, who showed us an empty room in which a light bulb went on and off, and that was all. It wasn't just

the non-spectacle that was so irritating. Just as annoying was the thought that Creed had so many predecessors.<sup>229</sup>

Januszczak's dismissal of the piece is comprehensive and takes in the artist, the group of artists with which he is seen as being aligned, the art school many of them attended and earlier artists who may have inspired them. Daniel Barnes on the other hand argues that Creed's installation had a lasting significance:

*The lights going on and off* is a good place to start if we want to understand how Creed's genius might escape us and why his work is so important. To my mind, this completely empty room with florescent strip lights that flicker on and off is a great work of art; indeed, I am willing to risk hyperbole and say it was the first truly great artwork of the twenty-first century.<sup>230</sup>

Although Barnes and Januszczak come to completely opposite views about the value of Creed's piece, they have one thing in common. Both verdicts are made by reference to context. Januszczak's dismissal of *Work No.227 The Lights Going On and Off* is categorical in the literal sense. Barnes' verdict is, as we will see, very much influenced by the fact that Creed's installation is a turn-of-the-century artwork.

These two very different recent evaluations of Creed's empty room illustrate the profound divergences of opinion this piece provoked. It seems likely that one factor causing this sharp divergence in evaluations was the difficulty faced by reviewers in discussing a piece that refused to allow them to use many of their customary critical tools. It is not surprising, given the paucity of formal characteristics and signifiers to report on, that the approach reviewers took was to concentrate on placing Creed's piece in context. However, Virginia Button points out that this itself is not necessarily a straightforward task, arguing that, 'Creed's diverse output defies categorisation within traditional genres of artistic production.'<sup>231</sup>

<sup>229</sup> Januszczak 18 June 2012

<sup>230</sup> Barnes September 2011

<sup>231</sup> Button p174

As we look at how the reviewers approached the classification of *The Lights Going On and Off* as an artwork, it is important to bear in mind that it is not an entirely straightforward matter even to classify it as an entity. This is not to open up a larger debate about the ontology of artworks in general, but to consider the specific differences between *The Lights Going On and Off* and other artworks we have discussed. The piece is not an object, in the way that Abts' paintings or Emin's bed are objects. It is stretching normal usage considerably even to call it an artifact, in the way that we might call McQueen's *Deadpan* an artifact. In many ways the piece has more in common with a performance than it has with an art object; it might indeed be considered performance art were it not for the absence of a performer. Some but not all of these ontological questions are characteristic of work that falls into the category of conceptual art, and that is certainly a label that has often been applied to Creed's work. Reviews of *The Lights Going On and Off* cite conceptual art as one of a number of reference points rather than locating the artist squarely within it. The Tate's exhibition notes described the artist as 'coming out of the tradition of minimal and conceptual art'<sup>232</sup> and it is the critics' references to those two categories of art that we will look at first.

Alex Coles' review of the exhibition for which Creed was nominated discusses the work entirely within the context of conceptual art. The review of Creed's show is discussed in parallel with a review of an exhibition of British conceptual art, which was running in London at the same time. Although Coles identifies Creed's work as conceptualist, he also implies a more tangential relationship, saying, 'Creed appropriates some of the key methodologies of conceptual art and gives them an incisive twist.'<sup>233</sup> His review compares Creed's work favourably with that of earlier British conceptual artists, which he characterises as 'either too coolly intellectual or mind-numbingly silly.' By contrast he sees Creed as engaged with real issues and working with serious intent. Coles places Creed's work, not in the context of British art, but of European and American strands of conceptualism that Coles sees as having more critical drive: 'Creed suggests a possible path

<sup>232</sup> *Turner Prize Tate 2001*

<sup>233</sup> Coles 2000

by which contemporary British conceptual art can proceed free of the burden of its local precedents’.

As Coles’ review makes clear, there is conceptual art and there is conceptual art. The term is one that has been coined relatively recently and although, as is the case with most artistic classifications, there are competing definitions of the term, the definition on the Tate’s own website is one with most critics would agree. It defines conceptual art as describing, ‘artworks in which the concept (or idea) behind the artwork is more important than traditional aesthetic and material concerns’<sup>234</sup>. Some conceptual artworks involve some physical making on the part of their authors; if Emin’s *My Bed* is an example of conceptual art, then it is one that has required the touch of the artist’s hand. Simon Starling’s *Shedboatshed* is a conceptual piece in which the materials have been worked upon intensely by the artist. But other conceptual artworks can exist in the form of sets of instructions that need only to be followed in order to instantiate the work.

Creed’s piece has that conceptualist characteristic, the ability to be written down like the score of a piece of music. A collector who purchases *The Lights Going On and Off* receives a set of instructions on to how to recreate the piece and, most importantly, the ownership rights over the piece that thereby authorise the purchaser to exhibit it as ‘*Work No.227 The Lights Going On and Off* by Martin Creed’. Button connects this aspect of Creed’s work with recurring themes of authorship and value that have been associated with conceptualism. She makes a connection between *The Lights Going On and Off* and the influence of the conceptualist Fluxus Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and then goes on to say, ‘the concerns of Conceptualist artists in the same period is evident in Creed’s work: he continues the enquiry into the notion of authorship, the role of the artist and the value of the art object...’<sup>235</sup> We might also reference here R.G. Collingwood’s<sup>236</sup> notion of the artwork as a mental object. Creed’s enquiry into these issues also has a practical

<sup>234</sup> Tate website [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk), Glossary of art terms

<sup>235</sup> Button p176

<sup>236</sup> *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* 1925

professional purpose; it is only through this process of certification and by virtue of the laws on intellectual property that he is able to sell his work. In 2010, *The Lights Going On and Off* was valued at £110,000 and three editions or versions of the work exist.

This multiple existence of the work troubles Adrian Searle, who makes brave, if rather equivocal attempt at formal analysis, and throws up the questions about the identity of the piece in its different stagings:

Martin Creed's single work at Tate Britain, Work Number 227: *The Lights Going On and Off* (it is exactly as the title describes it), is dated 2000, but is actually no different in concept from a work of the same title, designated Work Number 127, that was first presented at the Cubitt Gallery in London in 1995. Or is it different? Up in the middle of each truncated pyramid skylight are fluorescent strips hidden behind translucent sheets. Around the edge of these cowls are lighting tracks holding six spotlights per unit. The spotlights come on - suddenly. The hidden fluorescents power up a nanosecond later. It's bright for a bit, then the lights go off in a fast, even fade - an effect achieved through pure electromechanics rather than the artist's tinkering. You think about the semi-darkness for a bit, then the lights come on again. Creed's work is different every time it is shown, in each new venue, each with its own lighting fixtures and conditions. But do we care? It gives a critic sleepless nights.<sup>237</sup>

The question of what aspects of the work merited the critic's attention may have been the cause of Searle's insomnia. It is not clear to Searle himself whether or not his detailed description of the way that the spotlights and fluorescent tubes power up and fade out is actually relevant to an analysis of the work, or whether the details he describes are as they are for merely fortuitous reasons. Charlotte Mullins, the former editor of *Art Review* also expresses unease about the artist's recycling of a previous work in her review of the exhibition in *The Independent*:

Creed's work at Tate Britain, *Work #227: the lights going on and off*, was first made for an artist-run alternative gallery space six years ago, and has since been recreated in a commercial New

<sup>237</sup> Searle November 2001

York gallery, and now Tate Britain. That's how Creed works – he has the idea, numbers it, then adds it to his repertoire.<sup>238</sup>

The numbered titles draw the reviewers' attention to another category in which we can place *Work #227: the lights going on and off*. The prefix is an indication and a reminder that this piece falls into the larger body of work that is comprised of all the numbered pieces on Creed's list. These pieces have characteristics in common; for example, their titles tend to be a more or less complete description of the work as in the case of *Work No. 79, Some Blu-Tack kneaded, rolled into a ball, and depressed against a wall*, (1993) and *Work No. 88 A sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball* (1995). It is also true that these pieces are artworks that can be reproduced by the artist relatively easily by acting out the instruction that gives the work its title. We will consider again this aspect of the work, and its reproducibility in different environments, when we look at how the commentators discuss the work within the context of installation art.

Coles locates Creed's particular strain of conceptual art as one which is informed by influences that have come from outside what he regards as a parochial British scene:

Creed (a London-based artist) feasts on the tactics from a global banquet of conceptual practices besides those particular to the British fold. By making the audience aware of his discrimination, he in turn obliquely reminds them of the different standards of work produced by the reception of the respective strands of conceptual art.<sup>239</sup>

Several reviewers relate the piece, and Creed's work in general, to one particular strand of conceptual art, that of the Arte Povera movement. The movement, which formed in the late 1960s around the Italian critic and curator Germano Celant, is a form of conceptualism whose practice involves the use of everyday materials rather than those connected with traditional art practice, often using cheap, foraged or discarded material to construct artworks. In Ned Denny's review, a direct antecedent to the Creed's piece is cited. In 1966

<sup>238</sup> Mullins 2001

<sup>239</sup> Coles 2000

Alighiero Boetti, an artist connected with Arte Povera, created *Yearly Lamp*, which is set to light up briefly only once every year.

Charlotte Mullins also cites *Yearly Lamp* in her review, but she goes on to make the wider connection between Creed's work and Arte Povera:

Creed has a lot in common with Boetti and his fellow Arte Povera artists: a knowing wit, an interest in common materials, a subversion of Minimalism, a leaning towards subtle intervention rather than sensational statement.<sup>240</sup>

Mullins points to the Arte Povera artists' use of cheap everyday materials, which is indeed a feature of their practice that is shared by Creed, as evidenced by his work with paper and Blu-tak. Mullins also talks about a 'subversion of minimalism', implying that, although Creed's work is extremely minimalistic in its means, it is not in sympathy with the minimalist project. This interpretation is compatible with the contextual framework she has referenced; the Arte Povera movement was to a great extent seen as a reaction to (and a critique of) the aesthetic of minimalism that then dominated the contemporary art scene, particularly in the United States.

There is an aspect of the cultural critique offered by Arte Povera that reviewers also connect with Creed: its tendency to act as an irritant in disrupting and challenging the art institutions in which the work is exhibited. Coles had reviewed Creed's show four years earlier and he emphasised this agenda of disruption and irritancy, which he identifies as being at work in a precursor to *Work #227: the lights going on and off*.

The equally intrusive *Work No. 160, 1996*, included in the recent "Life/Live" exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, consists of a light turning on and off at 30-second intervals (a tactic once used by the Surrealists). Creed thus addresses both viewer and artist, in effect stating that if they refuse to question the legitimating function of the gallery and continue to produce/receive neutral "content," then he will either disrupt the conventions determining the hanging of exhibitions, or impede disinterested

<sup>240</sup> Mullins 2001

participation by literally blocking the works' visibility.<sup>241</sup>

As well as referencing the disruptive tactics of the Surrealist movement, Coles cites two politically radical cultural critics as relevant ideological context:

Creed clearly sympathizes with a long line of practitioners who have attempted to deconstruct the notion of hierarchy in philosophy and the arts. A sort of illegitimate godchild of Walter Benjamin and architect Bernard Tschumi, the artist carries out dissemination at the level of practical effects, through occlusion, outgrowths, and irritancy.<sup>242</sup>

Anne Colin's review also identifies this element of questioning institutional structures as an aim of *Work #227: the lights going on and off*, although she does not think that Creed has achieved his objective:

Creed's art is about redefining the space of the museum, and thereby raising the question of authorial ownership and the artistic value of the banal. ... A would-be radical challenge to the art space, then. Would-be but not really. Once again, the Turner Prize has failed in its mission.<sup>243</sup>

Searle agrees that, if the work is to be judged solely on the basis of the challenge it offers to the Tate as an institution, *Work #227: the lights going on and off* fails to deliver in that respect:

This is not so much a radical gesture as one of those artworks which institutions tend to love. Rather than "challenging" the institution, this piece reaffirms the museum's self-image as courtesan and midwife to the supposedly radical gesture. And there is nothing terribly radical about it. Works like this have a long history, an impeccable pedigree going back a century.<sup>244</sup>

There are clearly disagreements between reviewer as to the success or otherwise of the installation as a piece of conceptual art. In placing Creed's work in the context of conceptual art, but more precisely in the context of Arte Povera, the reviewers provide a framework within which *Work #227:*

<sup>241</sup> Coles 1997

<sup>242</sup> Coles 1997

<sup>243</sup> Colin, March 2002

<sup>244</sup> Searle December 2001

*the lights going on and off* can be read as a politically engaged work that seeks to mount a critique of the art world from within the walls of one of its leading institutions. In doing so, they provide a basis upon which the success or otherwise of the work can be discussed. However, reviews also referenced Creed's work in the context of Minimalism, an art movement that, on the face of it, has very little in common aesthetically or ideologically with Arte Povera. Minimalist artworks typically refuse all attempts to connect them with anything beyond the object itself and the space in which it is installed. Minimalism can be seen as an attempt to achieve purely abstract form; the minimalist artwork does not seek to represent any subject. The viewer's attention is directed towards the material reality of the object itself, rather than towards any external reality, physical or social.

Coles, however, sees conceptual art, not in opposition to minimalism, but as the next stage in a coherent line of progression from high modernism:

The increasing shift of modern critical thought from "work to frame"—from the work of art as an inner discipline (Modernist art), to an engagement with the architecture that frames that discipline in museums and galleries (Minimal art), to an interrogation of the legitimating ideological framework of all such institutions (Conceptual art)—is a remarkably logical one..<sup>245</sup>

Although Charlotte Mullins described *Work #227: the lights going on and off* as a subversion of minimalism, others have placed the work in a less ambiguous relationship with the Minimalism. Sophia Phoca describes the installation as 'solipsistically minimalist'.<sup>246</sup> The New York Museum of Modern Art, which owns an edition of the work, compares it to the silent sound piece *4'33"* by minimalist composer John Cage.

Daniel Barnes provides an art historical parallel, making a comparison between Creed and Michael Craig-Martin. This comparison throws up some interesting parallels. Craig-Martin is an artist whose work is usually classified as conceptual. He is best known for his 1973 piece *An Oak Tree*, which

<sup>245</sup> Coles 1997

<sup>246</sup> Phoca 2002

consists of a glass of water on a high glass bathroom shelf. The work, like many works of Arte Povera is constructed out of out of everyday objects, but its simple stripped down geometrical forms give it some of the qualities we would expect to see in a minimalist piece. Barnes argues that the impact of *An Oak Tree* lay in it providing a stark contrast to the art of 'bold statements and brash interrogations of artistic materiality' that were dominant at the time. Barnes evaluation of *Work #227: the lights going on and off* as 'the first truly great artwork of the twenty-first century' is made on the basis of arguing that the austerity of means that characterised the work acted as a corrective to the excesses of late twentieth century art, in the same way that *An Oak Tree* acted as a rebuke to the excesses of the nineteen sixties:

If Hirst and Emin shocked in the way that, say, Warhol did with bold statements and brash interrogations of artistic materiality, then Creed shocked as Michael Craig-Martin did with *An Oak Tree*— with minimalism.

Minimalism was, of course, not (at that time) new; it had an illustrious precedent in art from Malevitch and Mondrian through to Carl Andre and Donald Judd, not to mention in the architecture of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus. In 2001, timing was key to the effect, since the artworld was flooded with outrageous work, so Creed surprised us with much less than we had come to expect from our contemporary artists.<sup>247</sup>

Whether or not he considers Creed a minimalist artist, Barnes regards *Work #227: the lights going on and off* as a minimalist statement. He comments that, 'Creed proves that subtlety and simplicity are the keys to creating art that inspires primal delight in our experience of the dreary world.' Searle agreed that the key to Creed's success was due in part to the timeliness of the statement made by *Work #227: the lights going on and off*, but he argues that timeliness is not enough to guarantee a work's enduring value:

Creed's Lights Going On and Off will be remembered as much for winning as for its particular qualities, its time and place. A greater richness has to do with works slipping out of their time and circumstances, and having a longer, more complicated life. That is

<sup>247</sup> Barnes 2011

really how much time a work takes, otherwise it is nothing more than a footnote to the radical gesture.

Moreover Searle is not convinced by the minimalist brevity of Creed's statement. While the Tate's Turner Prize catalogue said of Creed's installation, 'the economy of means of *Work No. 227* exemplifies Creed's attempts to make work with minimal physical intervention,'<sup>248</sup> when Searle returned to the piece after the prize was awarded to Creed, his review includes an implied critique:

Doing the minimum possible to achieve the desired result is frequently regarded as a sign of clarity of thought - economy equals elegance, and simplicity virtue. We also crave complexity. Richness, of course, is not necessarily at odds with simplicity.<sup>249</sup>

For Searle, the extreme minimalism of *Work #227: the lights going on and off* fails to satisfy that desire for richness and complexity. But the stark simplicity of the work did provide another institutional challenge; that is a challenge to the process in which the institution describes and presents its exhibits to the public. The installation is shorn of any of the kind of formal features that would give purchase to curatorial description. The Turner Prize 2000 Exhibition notes describe the work thus: 'In exploiting the existing light fittings of the gallery space, Creed creates a new and unexpected effect.'<sup>250</sup> If describing the action of lights turning off and on as a new and unexpected effect seems a little extravagant, it is surpassed by the New York Museum of Modern Art catalogue description of their edition of the piece:

Creed controls the fundamental conditions of visibility within the gallery and redirects our attention to the walls that normally act as support and background for art objects. He treats the gallery as a medium to be molded, manipulating the existing lighting to create a new effect.<sup>251</sup>

It is possible to sympathise with those whose job it was to provide a gloss for Creed's work, but it is also possible at the same time to

<sup>248</sup> *Turner Prize Catalogue 2001*

<sup>249</sup> Searle December 2001

<sup>250</sup> *Turner Prize Catalogue 2001*

<sup>251</sup> Moma

sympathise with Matthew Collings' complaint about the 'sales-hype' language of some museum information cards and exhibition catalogues. Collings renewed his attack on the Tate's curatorial language in his coverage of the Turner Prize that year saying that it was, 'absolutely impossible for someone untrained to read the voodoo aura stuff, or write the vacuous prose they put in the press release'.<sup>252</sup>

However, the language used in the Museum of Modern Art catalogue description also emphasizes the use of the gallery as a medium, the use of the existing light fittings and the directing of the viewer's attention to the site in which it is installed. The catalogue also refers to the work as an installation. The term installation has expectations attached to it that go beyond simply being a description of the medium, as the Museum's website description of installation art reveals:

The everyday meaning of installation refers to the hanging of pictures or the arrangement of objects in an exhibition. The less generic, more recent meaning of installation is a site-specific artwork. In this sense, the installation is created especially for a particular gallery space or outdoor site, and it comprises not just a group of discrete art objects to be viewed as individual works but an entire ensemble or environment. Installations provide viewers with the experience of being surrounded by art, as in a mural-decorated public space or an art-enriched cathedral.

Considered within the category of installation art, *Work #227: the lights going on and off* sets up an expectation on the part of the reviewers of some element of site-specificity in the work. Charlotte Mullins read the piece as being about the physical space and the consciousness of the viewer: 'It's designed to make you question the space you stand in and to be aware of yourself in the room.'<sup>253</sup> When the jury awarded the Prize to Creed they praised the work's, 'sensitivity to the site'<sup>254</sup>.

<sup>252</sup> Collings November 2001

<sup>253</sup> Mullins December 2001

<sup>254</sup> Tate press release 3 December 2001

However several reviewers were sceptical about how site-specific, or even site-sensitive the installation actually was. After the Prize was announced Adrian Searle again noted that the piece had effectively been run before and suggested that the staging in the Tate worked less well than the original location.

Even people who don't much like Martin Creed's contribution to this year's Turner Prize will remember the frustrating enigma of standing in an otherwise empty space with the lights going on and off. They will recall being there. This, surely, is one of art's jobs: to make us aware of where we are, where we have been. But in the context of the Turner Prize, it only works theatrically its resonances are reduced in Tate Britain. The enigma, if you like, becomes a gag.

...This was my biggest doubt about Creed's decision to show this variant of a piece he first made at Cubitt Gallery in London in 1995. Here, as with so much art of the past century, context is everything. Standing in a darkened basement in King's Cross is rather different from being plunged into darkness at Tate Britain.<sup>255</sup>

The phrase 'plunged into darkness' echoes exactly the words of the exhibition notes, but Charlotte Mullins felt that even that phrase overstated the case:

The problem is, it just doesn't work. The gallery is, in part, naturally lit, so unless you arrive at night, the effect is not that dramatic. The gallery is in the centre of the show, so it operates more like a giant corridor between one work and the next rather than a work in its own right.<sup>256</sup>

Searle's disappointment is heightened by the fact that when the nominees were first announced in May, he had welcomed Creed's inclusion on the list, describing his work as 'oddly moving and disarming'.<sup>257</sup> Reviewing the shortlist exhibition in November, Searle pondered the artist's reason for choosing to exhibit this particular work, and speculated, 'maybe Creed believes that this is a rigorous and brave thing to have done: getting back to a kind of stripped-down statement.'<sup>258</sup> When the jury awarded Creed the Prize

<sup>255</sup> Searle December 2001

<sup>256</sup> Mullins 2001

<sup>257</sup> Searle May 2001

<sup>258</sup> Searle November 2001

the following month it seemed that, if Searle was right about what motivated the artist's choice of work, then it had paid off. Giving the jury's reasons for choosing Creed, the Tate press release said that they 'admired his audacity in presenting a single work in the exhibition'.<sup>259</sup>

In questioning the reason for Creed's choice of submission, Searle points to another significant category within which *Work #227: the lights going on and off* could be placed; it was a Turner Prize artwork. In fact when the Prize was awarded to Creed, Searle conceded, 'You might say this work is also a consummate Turner prize artwork, in its play on the sense of expectation.'<sup>260</sup> The expectations of the audience, the critics and the jury may have been of work that was less obscure and had more general appeal. Phoca points out that Martin Creed was actually selected out of the list of artists put forward by the general public. That nomination followed in the wake of Creed's very popular publicly commissioned piece *Work No.203: EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT* which consisted of the words 'EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT' (all upper case) spelled out in large neon letters. The neon sign was temporarily installed on the portico of a disused Georgian public building in Hackney, East London in 1999.

However, as Lynn Barber discovered during her stint as juror, the way that the Prize is judged creates some ambiguity about the relationship between the exhibitions mounted by the shortlisted artist, and the decision of the jury:

... the shows the jurors nominate are not the same shows the public sees at the Tate. The four shortlisted artists have to cobble together a new show (rather quickly) for the Tate, and some produce a good show and some don't. This is not supposed to influence the judges but it would be odd if it didn't. Many insiders believe that the reason the Chapman Brothers lost to Grayson Perry in 2003 was because their Tate show was disappointing. On the other hand, the public inevitably only judge the artists by the shows they put on at the Tate and are rightly baffled when, say, Martin Creed's light bulb walks away with the prize.<sup>261</sup>

<sup>259</sup> Turner Prize press release December 2001

<sup>260</sup> Searle December 2001

<sup>261</sup> Barber October 2006

Barber sees Creed as a case in which the artist was awarded the Prize despite his shortlist exhibition, not because of it. Virginia Button noted that there was a mixed reaction to the choice of work:

For those opposed to conceptual art, it provided a classic example of the emperor's new clothes, while many supporters of the artist felt it was the wrong work to show in a Turner Prize exhibition.<sup>262</sup>

Searle was one of those who expressed his disappointment at what he sees as a wrongheaded selection for the Turner Prize exhibition, describing Creed's installation as 'a singularly ungenerous use of an opportunity'.<sup>263</sup> It is clear from her review that Charlotte Mullins, although far from being an opponent of conceptual art, was nevertheless one of those whose thoughts turned to the story of the emperor's new clothes:

Earlier this year, in these pages, I described Martin Creed as being the emperor from the emperor's new clothes, riding through the streets of the art world, parading his works of art made from next-to-nothing. In the past few months, however, I have been forced to revise my opinion of him. For in reality, he's not the Emperor, but the Emperor's tailor, making works of nothingness and convincing others – curators, directors, writers – that they are the future of art.  
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So Creed's choice of work was a controversial one and there are different interpretations of that choice implied in the reviews. Searle wonders if it was sheer audacity on the part of the artist. When Creed carried off the Prize, Searle offered some grudging admiration of the tactic:

"I could have done that," may be a typical response to Creed's work.....The only response to "I could have done that" is "But you didn't". Did you have the gall, the nous, the ambition, the cheek?

For Mullins, Creed's installation confirmed her suspicion that Creed is in some sense an artistic charlatan. This was not for her an example of the cheeky artist taking advantage of a public platform to thumb his nose at

<sup>262</sup> Button p173

<sup>263</sup> Searle November 2001

<sup>264</sup> Mullins 2001

a great institution, rather it was Creed seducing and bamboozling that institution into seeing a work of art that was not really there.

Barnes however sees the choice as a timely one, providing a corrective response to the kind of art that had dominated Turner Prize exhibitions in the preceding years. His review casts contemporary art as a kind of conversation within which *Work #227: the lights going on and off* stands as a statement. The metaphor of conversation carries through into language that is auditory rather than visual. He describes the installation as a, 'quiet, understated work that does not shout or scream' and regrets the fact that in his view, 'Creed does not, in short, shout loudly enough, so his voice gets lost in the crowd'. He describes the work as, 'an antidote to the poisonous noise of contemporary art'<sup>265</sup>. Barnes' review places Creed's installation in the specific category of contemporary British art and identifies those features of the work that run counter to prevailing fashion as the reason for its excellence. He uses the metaphor of conversation to underline aspects of *Work #227: the lights going on and off*, that, in his view, represents a critique of the artistic tendencies that were dominant at that point in time.

If Barnes is right in characterizing *Work #227: the lights going on and off* as a statement, then that raises the two part question of what kind of statement it could be and what it is saying. There seems to be some agreement between commentators on aspects of the first part of the question, or at least on what tone or register the work adopts. The term that crops up most frequently is *wit*.

The Museum of Modern Art says of the piece, 'Creed's witty, sensorial work subverts the normal spatial and temporal parameters of viewing experience'<sup>266</sup>. The Turner Prize jury praised it for its wit. Sophia Phoca says of the piece, 'The 'so-what' effect is witty and refreshingly un-ironic.'<sup>267</sup> Even those less than convinced by Creed's piece seem to concede that quality to

<sup>265</sup> Barnes 2011

<sup>266</sup> MOMA

<sup>267</sup> Phoca 2001

the piece: Charlotte Mullins described it as possessing, 'a knowing wit'.<sup>268</sup> That description of a positive quality acknowledged by a number of writers raises a further question, because wit is a quality that cannot exist without a subject; one cannot simply be witty one must be witty *about* something. The adjective *witty* takes us back to the observation that the language Barnes uses to characterise the work is the kind of language that is more likely to be used to describe a contribution to a conversation rather than an object in a room. So, if *Work #227: the lights going on and off* is *witty*, as most commentators seem to agree, what is it witty *about*?

For Mullins, that answer is straightforward; the artist is a trickster whose wit is literally at the expense of the art world institutions who are willing to buy his empty room. But for the other commentators it is not quite so easy a matter to define the object of Creed's wit. Phoca describes the work as witty, and also 'un-ironic'; this again is a term that seems to demand that there is a *subject*. But, although Phoca is happy to note the wit and lack of irony in *Work #227: the lights going on and off*, when she begins to discuss what the work is *about*, she is far from certain:

this piece collapses in on itself in an endless series of negations. All expectations placed on the work are undermined. While some critics invested the work with insights into the role of art, its boundaries and its relationships with daily life, it could so easily be read as all that and a lot more – and also negate it all.<sup>269</sup>

When Searle discussed what the piece might be saying, he seemed to be weary of the efforts to interpret the piece:

You could say that this work has something to say about the visibility of the artwork, about presence and absence (and about something and nothing) - that there is no light without shadows. But I would much rather you didn't say anything remotely like that.<sup>270</sup>

<sup>268</sup> Mullins 2001

<sup>269</sup> Phoca 2002

<sup>270</sup> Searle November 2001

The idea that the piece might be in some way self-negating, or might be signifying self-negation is a feature of a number of reviews. In the Times, Rachel Campbell-Johnson also noted the piece's resistance to stable interpretation, saying that, 'his flickering Installation may mean everything or it may mean nothing.'<sup>271</sup>

One of the possible answers to the question is indeed that *Work #227: the lights going on and off* is in fact meaningless. There is little in the way of clues to the meaning of this specific work to be found in the comments of the artist himself. However, several reviewers look for the significance of the work by placing it in the context of Creed's overall body of work, whose significance is indicated by the presence of the prefix in its title. Jonathan Jones sees this as the vital context:

Is this numbering some quest for order, some attempt to give his art the qualities of a musical score? Perhaps, but what it really does is absolve him from defining his art or even calling it "art": what he has created is a special category of things in the world created by Martin Creed. What connects them is him, and that makes his entire output an epic act of slow, subtle confession.<sup>272</sup>

Jones argues that Creed's work is widely misunderstood, 'often either dismissed as empty gestures or praised with big cold words like Minimalism'. In contrast, he characterises Creed's body of work as a kind of autobiographical project, a chronological, non-hierarchical list that simply documents what Creed was thinking about at the point when each work was added. For Jones, the meaning of the work is only baffling when viewed in isolation, viewed as a moment in his larger body of work it connects with universal human concerns:

The experience is both moving and self-conscious: thought-provoking and boring. You can't help feeling a bit like a caricature of a modern art lover, standing there appreciating ... nothing. Other visitors poke their heads round the door, decide it's an empty room and head off for the Rossettis. Yet it's a simple universal metaphor. The secret of Creed's art is that it speaks of ordinary things like

<sup>271</sup> Campbell-Johnson December 2001

<sup>272</sup> Jones January 2014

love and loss. When someone dies the lights go off. That's what it's like.<sup>273</sup>

So Jones' argument suggests that *Work #227: the lights going on and off* could be seen not as a single statement, but more as a clause within the longer statement formed by the totality of the works on Creed's list. Other reviewers also find relationships between items on Creed's inventory. Ian McMillan mentions Creed's *Work # 161: the exclamation 'oh no'* which consists of the words 'oh no' being exclaimed. McMillan, relating it to another item on Creed's list asks, 'Is this the sigh after the cheer of *Everything Is Going To be Alright?*'<sup>274</sup>

*Work # 16: the exclamation 'oh no'* underlines the ambiguity involved in thinking of Creed's work as embodying any kind of statement. Unlike *Work #227: the lights going on and off*, it involves the use of words, indeed it entirely consists of words. But the words 'oh no' resist any stable meaning. In fact, they (no doubt fortuitously) echo the phrase 'oh ah' cited by the logical positivist Rudolf Carnap<sup>275</sup> as an example of non-linguistic words that were mere expressive noise-making.

Reviewers made use of Creed's other text based works as reference points to the significance of *Work #227: the lights going on and off*. Welcoming Creed's nomination when the Turner Prize shortlist was announced, Searle made reference to two of the artist's most well-known and popular neon text-based pieces:

'Everything is going to be alright', it said, a blue neon enjoiner to keep your chin up in a grim corner of the East End. He also had a work emblazoned across the frontage of Tate Britain: 'The whole world + the work = the whole world'.<sup>276</sup>

Searle's second example *Work # 143: the whole world + the work = the whole world* was referred to in a number of articles and by a number of reviewers,

<sup>273</sup> Jones January 2014

<sup>274</sup> MacMillan 2000

<sup>275</sup> quoted in Langer 1942

<sup>276</sup> Searle May 2001

not only because it was one of Creed's best known pieces, but also because it seems to offer some indication of Creed's artistic objectives. McMillan takes the text to be a manifesto for the work that Creed produces:

Creed has talked often of wanting to make us, as viewers, aware of the world around us and of using his work to draw attention to it. At the same time he wants to add to the world only what is necessary to achieve this effect. It's like a schematic game in which the more he can achieve by the littlest of means the purer the result, and it's embodied in the manifesto-like wall text of *Work # 143: the whole world + the work = the whole world*.<sup>277</sup>

However, if the *Work # 143: the whole world + the work = the whole world* is a manifesto, then it is an ambiguous one that presents an apparent paradox, not only by ostensibly arguing that  $A + B = A$ , but by announcing its own insignificance in foot-high neon writing installed on the front of the Tate museum.

McMillan identifies the economy of means in Creed's work as a significant feature and *Work # 143* as the artist's statement of intent to create art while adding as little as possible to the world. Several reviewers connect that agenda to *Work #227: the lights going on and off*. It is an artwork without any physical presence at all; the viewer sees nothing but an empty room. Nothing has been added to the gallery space and in one sense something is periodically taken away, the normal lighting conditions of the museum. The only material presence contained within the artwork is the electronic timer controlling the lighting, and that is hidden from the viewer.

The ambiguity of the statement embodied in *Work # 143: the whole world + the work = the whole world*, leads to different reviewers taking slightly different slants on Creed's artistic aims. It is possible to solve Creed's equation in this way: if the whole world + the work = the whole world, then the work = 0. But equally it is possible to read it as saying that the world on one side of the equation and the world on the other side are not the same, once the work exists as part of the whole world then the world is changed by the existence of the work. Like a Zen koan the statement simultaneously suggests two

<sup>277</sup> MacMillan 2000

opposite meanings; that art adds nothing to the world and that the creation of the artwork changes the world by virtue of being an integral part of it. Barnes argues that *Work #227: the lights going on and off* is successful in provoking the viewer into thinking differently not only about art but about whole world:

Sometimes art leads us to look at things differently, but most of the time – in Western art, at least – it only really makes us look at art differently by challenging us to think about what art is and what its value is. Creed, however, produces art that enables us to look at the world differently by offering works that are fully integrated with the world.<sup>278</sup>

The critical responses to *Work #227: the lights going on and off* are very varied in terms of both evaluation and interpretation. Different critics referred to different contextual frameworks in order to try to make sense of the piece, or to explain it, but it was generally regarded as an example of conceptual art. However, viewing the piece within each of the different categories highlighted different aspects of the work. The conceptual art category invites us to consider it in terms of the ideological agenda of Arte Povera. Placing it within the category of minimalist art highlights its self-referential nature, what Phoca refers to as its solipsistic quality. Jones places *Work #227: the lights going on and off* within the category implied in the title, the sum total of Creed's numbered artworks. In doing so he invites us to consider the piece as one statement in a longer discourse on art and its relationship with the rest of the world. Other critics saw the piece in the category of Turner Prize artworks and, as such, a witty comment, perhaps even a joke, at the expense of the Tate, confronting the jury with an empty room and daring them to not award him the Prize. Even though it contains no physical object, Creed's empty room is crowded with categories and contexts.

Critics whose normal practice is to refer in their reviews to the formal characteristics of the work that they are reviewing found that the usual language of art criticism, the language of the object, its properties and its form, was not an appropriate vehicle. The language that they instead turn to

<sup>278</sup> Barnes 2011

is the kind of language that we more often use about an utterance; the piece was quiet and witty or it blew a vulgar raspberry. Coles talks about the piece addressing the viewer, several reviewers talk about it as a challenge, Jones describes it as a confession. For Barnes the work is a statement, one that seeks to refute the statements that have come before it, and even Searle, despite his doubts about the work's lasting value, agrees that whatever value it has, comes it being a timely from intervention.

In the case of *Work #227: the lights going on and off*, the idea that critics might arrive at their evaluative judgements by measuring its properties against a set of generic criteria is far-fetched. That is not how critics judged the work. The language of their reviews suggest that, rather than discussing Creed's installation as if it were being judged against a strict set of rules, they discussed it as one would discuss a contribution to a conversation. A conversation has rules of a sort: we expect that contributions will be relevant and of interest. But those quasi-rules are set by those who are themselves involved in the conversation. Viewed in that light, Creed's contribution to that conversation was a gnomic one and different critics interpreted it in very different ways. Some saw it as a profound comment, some as a witty remark and some as a puerile joke, but each of the reviewers based their evaluations on the perceived quality of Creed's contribution to that wider conversation.

## 7. Ideal Critics and the Uses of Reason.

Carroll and Sibley each in their own way describe the ideal critic. In the reviews of Turner Prize exhibitions, we can see art criticism as it is actually practised in our own time. Sibley would recognize the way in which the critics make use of metaphor to draw attention to the aesthetic qualities they perceive in the work. Carroll would approve of one characteristic: the critics put evaluation at the heart of what they do. But to what extent would he be satisfied that, when giving their evaluations, the critics have arrived at them by exercising their reason and are not simply airing their personal preferences?

In *On Criticism*, Carroll set himself the challenge of establishing evaluation as the central purpose of criticism. As part of that mission he sought to counter the argument of those who would downgrade the importance of evaluations on the grounds that they are merely expressions of personal preference. His means of doing so was to argue that genre-based criteria could be applied in the evaluation of artworks, so enabling him to claim that art criticism is an activity rooted in the use of reason. For Carroll, the ideal critic is one who can support her evaluations with reasoning that is objectively verifiable. Carroll makes a good case for the centrality of critical evaluation but, regarding his secondary argument, I have pointed out a number of difficulties that I will summarise here.

### *Classifying Art*

One problem is his concept of genre. I have argued that Carroll's notion of genre is somewhat like a dog show, in which different breeds are entered into different classes of competition and are judged according to the criteria of the appropriate class. Just as it would be wrong to apply the same artistic criteria to both a Dutch still life and a horror movie, so it would be wrong to judge a Jack Russell by the standards appropriate for a Great Dane.

There are several problems attached to this kind of approach. The first is the inflexibility of this model; there seems to be no reason why the rules of the

genre should ever change, why new genres should come into existence. If professional artistic success is dependent on working to meet the expectations of a genre, then it is surprising that artists do not put more time and effort into gaining expertise within that genre than they do. Instead, many seem to be trying to resist the generic classifications that would be their only sure way of establishing the value of their work.

The second problem is whether or not the different classes in the dog show have criteria that judges can actually use to measure the dogs against. For Carroll's argument, a crucial question is how narrowly or broadly we define the term genre. It might be argued that I am doing an injustice to Carroll's argument by comparing his concept of genre to classes in a dog show. It is true that, in Carroll's argument, genre is not always so narrowly defined. His generic classifications appear to cover a very wide range of ways of grouping artworks, from true genres to art movements, styles and periods. Examples he gives of generic classifications include contemporary dance, religious painting, still life, cubism, satire, film-noir, costume drama, horror film and comedy. While some of these classifications come complete with well-defined sets of conventions, others do not. Correctly classifying two works of art as divergent as J M W Turner's *The Grand Canal, Venice* (1835) and Chris Ofili's *Afro Sunrise* (2003) as landscape paintings might throw up some interesting comparisons, but it does not help to generate any obviously useful critical principles by which they might both be evaluated.

Martin Creed's *Work No.227 The Lights Going On and Off* and Simon Starling's *Shedboatshed* were both identified by many critics as examples of conceptual art, as they share one of the standard features of conceptualism, the privileging of concept over form. Furthermore, some critics narrowed down their contextual classification of both Creed and Starling, noting that they share the Arte Povera characteristic of rejecting the use of traditional art materials. But beyond that, *Work No.227 The Lights Going On and Off* and *Shedboatshed* have little in common. In the case of *Shedboatshed*, the critics saw a large physical object that had been shaped by the artist's hand. They were provided with the back-story and were thereby able to make clear

interpretations of the work and to discuss what it was saying about mass production, consumer culture, the environment and so on. In the case of Creed's installation, none of that was true; the critics saw no object, no touch of the artist's hand, no back-story or explanatory text. Many found the piece to be enigmatic or self-negating. The mere fact that these pieces are classified as conceptual art or Arte Povera would not offer any obvious guidelines for judging whether Starling's work is better than Creed's or vice versa.

That brings us to the third problem, which is that, when we start to apply the dog show model to contemporary art, there seem to be a lot of happy mongrels who do not want to compete in any of the established classes. Carroll recognizes that some work may fall in multiple classifications, but implies that it is the exception rather than the rule and paints it as a useful, interesting and bracing challenge for the critic. He also acknowledges the special problems in classifying contemporary and avant-garde art, but argues that those initial classification issues are to be expected as a natural part of a cyclical process of change and development. However, I would argue that one test of a theory of art criticism is that it should provide some tools that are useful in the practice of art criticism. A model of critical evaluation that is not useful for evaluating current practice is inadequate with respect to the needs, not only of reviewers of the Turner Prize, but also of most critics in all fields of the arts. It is the nature of the critic's role to engage with the works of her own age, no matter what discipline is their specialty. Also, I would question the novelty of the kinds of contemporary work that are problematic for Carroll's system of generic evaluation. Nearly a century after Duchamp's *Fountain*, we still do not, as Jonathan Jones pointed out, have a set of criteria that explains why one ready-made is better than another.

In addition to these three areas of difficulty, where, in general, the issue puts into question the usefulness of Carroll's approach, there is also reason to doubt Carroll's claim that, by applying genre specific criteria, it is possible to make deductions about the quality of an artwork merely from the objectively verifiable presence of some particular element.

But, as Sibley points out, we cannot infer aesthetic qualities from non-aesthetic properties; there can always be a counter example and insisting on genre specific criteria does not overcome that objection. However, suppose we were to moderate Carroll's claim in order to overcome that objection. Rather than claiming that (within the context of a genre) we can infer aesthetic qualities in an artwork from its non-aesthetic properties, we might argue that it is possible to infer the positive effect within an artwork of certain positive aesthetic properties.

Even this more limited claim is not supportable however. If we notice that critics agree that life and movement is a positive feature of the paintings of Tomma Abts, then we might try to generalize that observation and infer that life and movement is always a positive feature of artworks in general. Having seen that there are counter examples (we have pointed out Anthony Gormley as evidence to the contrary), we might retreat to a genre-specific claim, that life and movement are positive features of abstract painting, and in that case it might be very much more difficult (but not impossible) to find counter examples. However, even if we were to drastically narrow the classification down to 'the paintings of Tomma Abts' there would still be a problem. It might well be that we can show that every Tomma Abts painting in existence benefits from life and movement as positive features, but we cannot guarantee that at some point in the future, next week, next month or next year, she might not produce a painting whose positive aesthetic qualities were silence and stillness and in which any sense of movement or life would be a negative factor.

One of the reasons that the formula Carroll proposes fails to solve the problem is that he neglects the importance of meaning. If artwork of a particular kind is generally made better by feature F, then, for Carroll, the only important question is the presence or absence of good-making feature F in that kind of artwork. He is not concerned with what F might signify, or its relationship to other elements and features of the artwork. But, without knowing the significance of F within the context of the work as a whole, we cannot know whether F contributes positively to the piece. If McQueen's

slapstick stunt in *Deadpan* were simply edited into a slapstick comedy film, it would not be a positive addition.

I have suggested that Kendall Walton's idea of categories of art has more potential value in the evaluation of artworks than Carroll's notion of genres. Walton's approach recognises that all artworks exist in multiple categories. Some of these categories are what we might call categories of ignorance. As we become more knowledgeable about a category and experience more work that falls within it, we are more able to appreciate it. Walton uses the example of Chinese music or serialist composition that, until we have gained experience of the category, may sound like a baffling noise. We gain a richer understanding of the paintings of Tomma Abts if we view them in the context of twentieth century modernist abstraction than if we simply see them as 'modern art'.

On the other hand, there are clearly other categories that are not simply cancelled when we acquire greater knowledge and experience. For example, if we take Chris Ofili's *Afro Sunset*, we might appreciate the painting more fully if we were steeped in knowledge of the work produced by artists involved with, or influenced by, the British black arts movement. However, that would not make the category of landscape painting cease to be relevant to our appraisal of the work, nor would it reduce its relevance in any way.

Walton argues that, although a single artwork can be seen in the context of many different categories, for every artwork there is one correct category, and that the artwork can only be appreciated in full when viewed in that correct category. The people who live in his imaginary society are unable to perceive the qualities that we might see in Picasso's *Guernica*, because to them it looks like a particularly dull example of their own standard artwork, the 'guernica'. But if the 'guernica' is the wrong category in which to place Picasso's *Guernica*, that leaves the question of what category *would* be the correct one. Walton refers to *Guernica* as a cubist painting, which indeed it is. But we might also consider history painting, propagandist art, landscape painting, war art, and possibly a number of other classifications as candidates

for being the correct category in which to view the painting. My interpretation of the idea of the correct category may go further than Walton intended. It arises from a question; what would the correct category for an artwork look like?

My answer would be that it would not necessarily look like a genre in Carroll's sense of the term. In order to be complete, the correct category in which to appreciate an artwork would need to be constructed of all the relevant elements of all the relevant categories within which the artwork can reasonably be viewed. The correct category to appreciate *Afro Sunset* would be one that incorporated the relevant contexts of black British art, landscape painting and whatever other contexts competent critics thought were relevant to the painting. It is not necessary for that correct category to have a name, and I do not see any reason why the correct category for an artwork should not, in certain cases, be unique to that artwork.

### *Uses of Reason*

Walton's notion of an artistic category is a subtler and more flexible concept than Carroll's genre and seems better adapted to accommodate the contextual complexity of many Turner Prize artworks. It focuses the viewer on the variable and contra-standard features of the work, providing a useful framework for analysis and interpretation. However, it does not have the advantage claimed by Carroll for his approach; it does not provide a theoretical basis for the objective grounding of evaluative judgements. If we are not ready to accept Carroll's approach, must we therefore abandon the idea that the critical evaluation of artwork involves the exercise of reason? I would argue that we do not need to abandon that idea and that the critics have not abandoned the exercise of reason in their practice. In attempting to bridge the gap between non-aesthetic properties and aesthetic qualities, Carroll is aiming for a standard of objective verifiability that is not necessary for the defence of reason-based criticism. If we rule out criticism as a reason-based activity on the grounds that we cannot develop critical principles, then we rule out of order many other areas of scholarship. The hard sciences

would be fairly safe; their core business is to develop laws that are based on empirical evidence and that can be tested for the accuracy of their predictive power. But other academic disciplines could be in trouble. There has been a parallel debate within moral philosophy about whether it is possible or necessary to identify general moral principles, and, as Carroll himself points out, moral particularists hold that the making of objective ethical judgements is not dependent on the existence of a set of moral principles. Jonathan Dancy, for example, argues that the belief that moral judgements require moral principles is a mistake.<sup>279</sup> If the test of a reason-based activity is that it is possible to formulate laws that are accurately predictive, then the history department may be out in the cold, possibly with the economics department not far behind it. I am happy to concede that there is no way of objectively determining whether or not the lines in the paintings of Tomma Abts possess the qualities of life and movement.

It is not necessary to insist on that scientific standard of proof. Carroll's *On Criticism* exemplifies the way in which debate over critical reasons has focused on one issue, the perceived need to be able offer objectively verifiable reasons in support of our aesthetic judgements. There are multiple ways in which the critics reviewing the Turner Prize exercise reason in arriving at and supporting their evaluative judgements. The four uses of reason within critical evaluation that are outlined here are ones that are plainly evident in the reviews: identifying non-generalisable relationships, classification, interpretation and collective evaluation.

The first is the identification of those features of a specific work that contribute to the effect perceived by the critic. As Sibley<sup>280</sup> points out, while it is not possible to generalise such relationships into a rule, it is perfectly reasonable for a critic to say, for example, that the reticent quality that she sees in the painting is due in part to its muted colours. She is not claiming that the muted colours will necessarily have that effect in a different painting, she is saying

<sup>279</sup> Dancy *Ethics without principles* OUP 2004

<sup>280</sup> Sibley p9

that, as they are used in this particular painting, they have that particular effect.

Now, at this point, it might be objected that we are back to relying entirely on the subjective impression of the critic. However, I will argue that, when the critic makes such an observation, she does so in the knowledge that the connection between muted colour and reticence is so widely accepted within our culture, that it is not necessary to provide evidence to support the claim. Were it necessary to provide evidence to show the connection, then it could be found not only in the study of art history, but in marketing, fashion, and other areas of commercial activity that make use of survey-based research and other methods developed within the social sciences. It is not necessary to do so. A connection between muted colour and reserve is so accepted within our culture that we do not even need to think about it. If we were asked to dress in a reserved and sober manner for a particular occasion, we would not arrive wearing brightly coloured clothing. The metaphor is deeply embedded in the language; we talk of wearing a loud shirt or painting a room in quiet colours. When the critic says that muted colours contribute to a perceived sense of reticence or reserve, she is indicating a relationship is amply supported by evidence. That evidence is not presented within the review and the supporting argument not made, precisely because that relationship is so fully assimilated a part of our visual culture that it seems obvious.

The second use of reason evident in the reviews is in the work of classification. Although Carroll's approach to classification did not provide useful evaluative tools in the case of the Turner Prize, the reviews do show how important classification is to reviewers when they are making and justifying their appraisals. Great effort was made by reviewers to identify relevant contexts as precisely as possible. Critics used a range of methods, including many identified by Walton, in order to do this. These included identifying standard and variable features, making comparisons with known categories and researching contextual information. The direct observations of

the art objects were informed by the academic disciplines of art history and cultural theory.

The third use of reason is the analytical and evidence based reasoning undertaken by critics in the area of interpretation. As I have pointed out, in the reviews, issues of meaning and value are not kept in separate compartments. Eric Newton and Frank Sibley jointly provide the example of the meadow, which illustrates how closely entwined are meaningful and aesthetic qualities. The dominance of the Turner Prize by conceptual art has inevitably put meaning at the centre of many reviews, but I would argue that meaning and value are no less linked in the abstract paintings of Tomma Abts.

The fourth use of reason that I want to identify is one that I have referred to as collective evaluation. This is a use that it is possible to evidence from individual reviews, but which I will discuss instead by reference to the reviews en masse in the next section.

#### *Evaluation as a Collective Endeavour*

Dickie's institutional definition of art is effectively the working definition I have used for this study. His approach to defining art helpfully underlines an important fact: that whatever else art is, it is a social phenomenon. The evaluation of art is often imagined as a solitary activity; I stand before the artwork and make my judgement. The perennial question at issue is whether my judgement is purely subjective, or whether it can be said to be in any sense objective. However, when we look at the process of evaluation as it takes place during the annual Turner Prize, we can see it far more as a collective enterprise, involving curators, news journalists, the art market and the general public. Above all though, when we think about the evaluation of artworks, we think about the role of the critic.

We read reviews for a range of different reasons. The common assumption is that we read a review of an exhibition in order to decide whether or not to go and see it. But we may also read a review of an exhibition that we know we

will not be able to visit, and do so out of interest or to keep up with the latest developments in some particular area of artistic practice. We may also read reviews of an exhibition that we have *already* visited; we might want to know if the critic's evaluation tallies with our own, or whether she can shed light on some aspect of the exhibition that has puzzled us. Occasionally we might even change our minds about what we have seen, because of what we have read in a particularly persuasive review.

When we go to exhibitions, we often do so with friends or members of our families and we discuss what we have seen. We may talk with other people who have seen the same exhibition on a different occasion, and compare notes with them. While attending the exhibition, we will learn more about the work we are seeing, by reading the information provided by curators, or by talking with museum staff. I would argue that these activities, the reading of reviews and the discussions that take place about the work we have seen, more truly represent the way in which most people engage with art, than does the image of the solitary viewer, silently arriving at a judgment. Clearly, when we discuss art exhibits, or read about them, we are inclined to give more weight to the views of those whom we consider to have most knowledge and expertise in the area. We look to the critics for guidance, but we do not simply accept their views and adopt them ourselves. We may be persuaded by the critic, or we may not. We may form a view about the bias of certain critics and adjust our opinion of their evaluation accordingly, or we may decide, after reading many reviews, that one particular critic is particularly insightful and value her views over those of other critics.

In the introduction to this study, I gave a caveat about the degree of agreement between the critics on a work of art. I acknowledged that one could not be sure whether different critics had used similar language because they had independently come to the same conclusions, or whether they had been consciously or unconsciously influenced by each other. Clearly, the fact that this cannot be known for certain would weaken any claim I wished to make about the inter-subjectivity of the aesthetic qualities they identify. However, if we consider the evaluation as a collective process, then the

question is not so troubling. Indeed, we should consider a degree of interaction, or even influence, between critics to be a positive element in the social evaluation of art.

In taking this position, what I am in a sense endorsing is an idea of collective evaluation that goes back to one implied by David Hume's description of the ideal critic:

Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.<sup>281</sup>

For Hume it is the *joint* verdict of expert critics that guarantees that aesthetic judgements are not purely subjective. The implication of his phrase 'joint verdict,' is that Hume would prefer unanimity, but I would argue that in order to establish a collective evaluation a degree of dissent and debate is not necessarily a bad thing.

An objection might be raised to this argument, namely that the idea of a joint verdict does not sit well with the examples of the extreme divergence of the views of competent critics we have seen in commentaries on the Turner Prize. The diametrically opposing opinions held by Waldemar Januszczak and Daniel Barnes on the work of Martin Creed is an example. In such a case, where the range of views fell across a very wide spectrum, any attempt to arrive at a joint verdict might amount to nothing more than a crude averaging out of unresolved differences.

It would be possible to resort to using Carroll's defence here and to say that such divergent views are simply due to the exceptional nature of contemporary and avant garde practice. But I do not take that position as I think it is untenable, not only because it is vulnerable to the objection I raised

<sup>281</sup> Hume *Of the Standard of Taste*

to Carroll's position, but also because there are many examples of present day critics having divergent views about the art of the past.

A reasonable response to any important situation in which we are receiving conflicting expert opinion, is to accept our own responsibility to make a judgement based on our own evaluation of the best evidence that we can get. That might include detailed analysis and evaluation of arguments put by experts and a consideration of their relative credentials and track records. It might also involve direct observation of the evidence to gain ones own first-hand experience or the commissioning of further enquiries. This would be a reasonable response to take in many contexts, from formulating government policy to tackling an outbreak of dry rot. It is also a reasonable response with respect to the evaluation of artworks.

The notion of collective evaluation does not imply that we should average out the views of critics where they diverge widely, nor does imply that we rely on the wisdom of crowds and accept the most popular view, nor the most consensual view. Instead, it implies that we should acknowledge the divergence and seek to resolve the issue using the kinds of methods I have outlined above. The case of J M W Turner and John Ruskin provides an example that takes advantage of the benefits of hindsight. There were widely diverging critical views of Turner's work in his own time and after his death. The extended, detailed and closely argued defence of Turner, mounted by Ruskin in his popular and influential series of books *Modern Painters*, contributed over time to a shift towards a more strongly positive consensus on the value of his work.

In the case of J M W Turner, we have the advantage of being able to see that Ruskin's positive evaluation of his work has at least stood the test of time. We do not have that luxury in the case of the Turner Prize reviews, but if we consider the expertise, knowledge and earnest intent evident within them, there are good reasons to think that, in the British press, the practice of art criticism is in good shape. However, that does not mean that the task of evaluating artworks should be left in the hands of the critics. The Turner

Prize, and the commentaries that surround it, provide an opportunity to see the process of collective evaluation at the point where it is most visible.

Approached in this light, the evaluation of artworks is not a matter of judging them against a set of agreed criteria, nor is it simply the subjective view of the individual, nor is it a matter where we can just accept the word of an expert. It is an active, ongoing, collaborative, inter-disciplinary process that is open to anyone who wishes to participate. I have suggested that, in some cases, it is more useful to think about an artwork not as an object, but as a contribution to a conversation. The Turner Prize is the event in which it can most clearly be seen that the conversation does not only involve artists, but also includes critics, journalists, curators and the general public.

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