

Turner Prize 08

Is there a cure for a bad case of curation?

Is this the best art in this nation.

Where art Thou, Creator of Light?

Four creative oeuvres and not an omelette in sight.

No chef bold enough to crack the eggshells,

no curate brave enough to speak up.

Too dark to see,

too hard to swallow.

The Emperor's clothes are soiled with blood, sweat, tears and ordure. A sulphurous stench only to be brightened with Omo. My daughter says Vanish Oxy-Action Max would work better, on modern art!

After today's experience at Tate Britain, I am reminded of a Belgian born artist/poet who worked in France. Henri Michaux, born 1899, died 1984. He wrote that he considered 'drawing as a release from words' and 'a new language spurning the verbal.' He has just one work on display at Tate Modern, quite a vigorous black and white piece, perhaps rooted in calligraphy or at least mark making. More like Art than Writing. More like Calligraphy than the never ending, diaphanous torrent of anti-visual annotation and diary writing pretending to be art in recent years. At least I didn't have to Read it or interpret it. But Henri Michaux couldn't have won the Turner Prize, too foreign, too old. Dead too. So much for equal opportunity. Ageism is rampant in Art. And what do we see when entering the first gallery of the Turner Prize. Words.

Words to left of me, photomontages to right of me, sculpture in front of me. And a couple of B&Q architectural fittings that have fallen off the back of a lorry. Oops, am I being rude? (Yes, thanks, Lady Sov.) But whose words are they?

What are they for? Why do we need them? I can See the glass sculpture, I suppose I can't touch it but there is light enough to see right through all the glazing, though there is almost nothing there. I didn't come away with an insight into spirals or mathematical series, though there was a whiff of something monotonously repetitive and uninspired. Eyes already glazing over by the sculptural glazing and so much yet to gaze at.

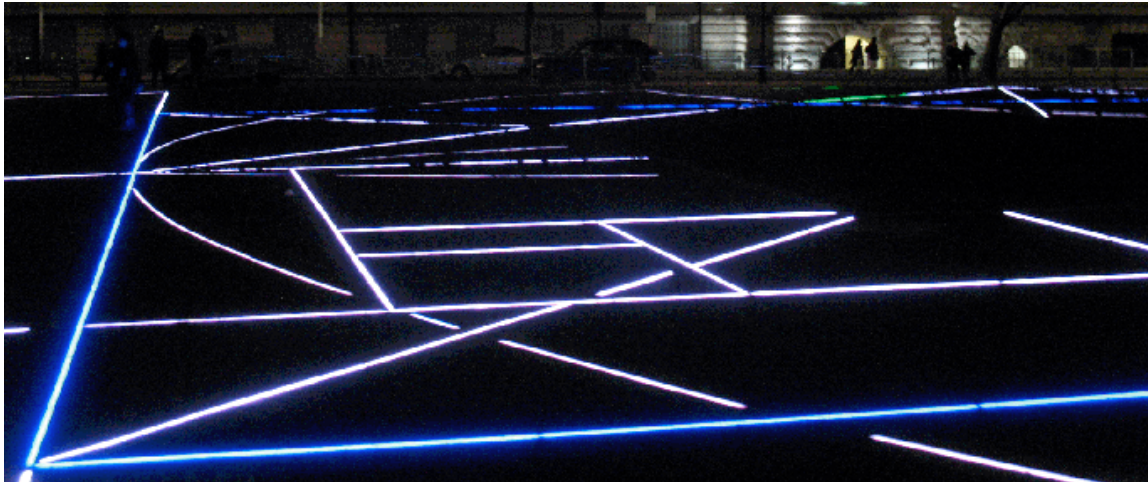
Have another take of the Words that were on the left. It's like a Thesaurus Shampoo for the brain, fragrant bubbles. Pop – they are all gone – but brainwashed already. Read them once and you are almost seduced. But I came to see Art not to Read fanciful Literature. Read them twice and you realize the world of Copy-writing is no longer the copyright of Madison Avenue and commercial art, but has taken over Art Galleries. These hallowed halls of Mammon and speculation. More diamonds for your skull, Sir? Would you like them from Zimbabwe or Sierra Leone? No thanks, conflict diamonds can't even be swallowed on the lagers of De Beers.

The Tate is nowadays just as commercial as the BBC of course: entry ticket, gallery shop, consumer knick-knacks, cut price catalogues that would end up in the bin if they

could even be given away. Read the bunkum a third time. It's all part of the doctrine of critical theory and high pretence from the altar of the cathedral of art Mystification. Real Art doesn't need such pontification. Real Art doesn't need an apologist.

I searched the internet high and low for a work by Suzanne Cotter. Not a sausage, nor even a bean. No sign, no evidence of experience as an artist. Let's try again. Jennifer Higgle. The wonderful world of the web reveals that her experience in London circles includes waitressing. But not obviously an artist. Strike a light, Blue. (We'll need it later to see the work in dark corners.) Now to Daniel Birnbaum. I have to thank Anna Lindström for her valiant effort in getting him to reveal his talent in cut-paper self-portraiture. Herr Birnbaum, I take my hat off to you. Qualified to be a juror on account of your effort. But a shiver of doom runs down my spine when I find that he has contributed to an essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism. So Swedish? Stephen Deuchar, no web evidence of 'artist in residence'. David Adjaye. At last! Royal College of Art. Something I can relate to. Been there, done that, designed the tee-shirt. An expert with graphite, elephant dung and pigment under his finger nails perhaps. But then Your Black Horizon is an omen for the dark rooms to come. For their own sake I have kept the research of the curators in the dark, just as much as they have kept me in the dark.

Would you be happy at The Old Bailey if the trial judges had so little qualification in Law and the Jury were twelve good men and true selected behind closed doors by combative Counsel? I don't want that candidate on my jury, s/he will have a prejudiced view on account of the accused having a history of cannibalism. This juror looks like a graffiti vandal, no thank you Mr. Banksy. Next please for a jury of your peers; Peter Blake, accepted, Bridget Riley, peerless. Stuart Brisley. We'd better check the archive? Now that would give contemporary art a proper trial and Turner would be proud of his prize.



Parade Ground Millbank

Arriving at Tate Britain I was bowled over by The Parade Ground Millbank, on the other side of the road, with the spectacular patterns of lights set into the paved courtyard. How could I have known that it would put this year's Turner Prize completely in the shade? And just around the corner in a tiny private gallery, a white dress with butterflies

cut from the skirt and fluttering off on their string bound journeys. Delightful, enlightening, uplifting – not melancholic. This is the work of Su Blackwell presently exhibiting at the Long and Ryle Gallery. The piece that caught my attention is ‘While you were sleeping’.



‘While you were sleeping’

How many rows of bricks are needed when there is stunning work like this to behold?

Art is not merely an exercise in keeping university academics off the dole queues, even if it could look like that. And there were plenty of those about in May 1968. So why is Art still dragging a mountain of hangers-on with it. Cry freedom. Artists are not slaves.

Can I get back to the Turner Prize? With difficulty, reluctantly. From the glazing and the architectural samples then some photomontages. I was impressed by the work of John Heartfield, formerly Helmut Herzfeld. Died 1968, the year I graduated. But his work still towers high above anything I saw in these frames. Is there no meaning in copyright these days? Rifle through an archive, juxtapose some random ingredients, stick it in a frame. Presentation over Content? Give the curator something to do sticking captions on the walls. The doctor confirms there is nothing that can be done for this epidemic of incurable curation. Zimbabwe only has cholera to export. We have this. The next room.

In a gallery, with clean walls and clean floors, this could be art. But maybe it’s just fly-tipping.



This IS fly-tipping. Real, not Art-ificial.

It reminded me of a Soviet supermarket in Novosibirsk where I went in search of food. There were hundreds of naked pink plastic dolls for girls and naked green plastic tractors for boys. But, in a city of one million, just one small table with cheese, milk and meat. Soon after, the Soviet Union collapsed. Soon enough this flimsy artifice will collapse? Then I tried to relate this installation to other Turner Prize works of art and Tracey Emin's bed came to mind. What a nightmare. No, I've never slept with her, and no, no again; it wasn't me who started the warehouse conflagration in which her bed was despatched to Hades and the underwriters' archive at Lloyd's. It's bad enough getting Tesco to collect their stolen trolleys in East Finchley, but dumping check-outs doesn't make me 'Tate-and-Lyle' ☺. Find this abomination in a council house in Haringey and they'd be sending the social workers round. Even in Haringey. And so into the dark.

It's fashionable to refuse to light exhibitions in this secular world. Black is finally the new black. Cats in coal cellars? Black as Newgate's knocker! If I go to a cinema there is perhaps a Wurlitzer organ, an ice-cream seller, an usher to see me to my seat with a torch. The lights dim, the curtains part and the film starts. That's what I paid for, an original cinematographic experience. But none of these art films are ever going to get into cans or out to Cannes. Is it even original? Wouldn't it be fun to run the projector backwards, or at half speed, or double speed, or freeze it and burn holes in the film. It's all been done accidentally or intentionally before. It was better the first time in the era of DaDa. Now the old-fashioned film projectors are more entertaining than the projected images. That's why they shouldn't let you into the projection room, or leave the projectors in the gallery.

Are we at room four yet? Spongy seats! Sticky fingers? Shaky camera, derelict content. The discarded tickets and nose tissues on the floor, are they part of the aesthetic experience?

I wonder if the gallery attendant in the corridor sitting on a stool posed like The Thinker by Auguste Rodin had been told to sit like that? He was outshining the film, backlit in red, which in this gloom is not difficult. Auguste Rodin, another deceased candidate for the Turner Prize.

Prize winning exhibits: from a dark corridor we come into hallowed Bright Darkness, again. Is it a training run for a stealth bomber? I don't believe the notice on the slide projector that said the piece was not functioning. It was a black light stealth projector in camouflage of course! What else do you expect? More conceptual art that should never see the light of day? How many curators does it take to change a light bulb? Witchcraft! The fashionable black art that doesn't need to work. A little light relief that nothing needed to be seen? Batty, but not even fit to house a colony of bats.

Next to it was a shady piece of paper, in a black frame, with a centred column of Words in capital letters.

I challenged
the
gallery
staff to
explain
why
the lighting
level was
so dim
that this
piece
could
not be
comfortably
read
and he
gave
plenty of
implausible
answers.

The projector that was nearby would have spilled some illumination. No, I don't think so. The artist wanted the work to be almost impossible to read in the dark. Again, I don't think so and if that is the case then I hope not. The lighting at the Natural History Museum of the Darwin Exhibition has received huge numbers of complaints at the insufficiency of the lighting to view and read the exhibits, whether they are originals or facsimiles. Here at The Tate there was not a low level of illumination with a 40 lux spotlight at fifteen paces. There was simply no intentional illumination. **Turn right** and there on another wall is a vacuum formed poster. White plastic, white light. At last I can say I saw it. And finally to the film. I watched a dozen members of the paying audience slouched in the chairs as the black-and-white cartoon flickered across the screen accompanied by a droning commentary. They all gradually drifted away. No ice cream, no pop-corn, no Wurlitzer. No comments or reactions except heading for the exit. Talking with their walking. I sat it out. No joy. Melankoli, jag kunde äta en konstnär här i mörker. Soon out into a cold Winter's night and more endless expanses of modern dark, stabbed by glancing light pollution. Joy, oh joy. To the Parade Ground Millbank and daydreaming of 'While you were sleeping'. Was the jury sleeping, M'lud? It's a travesty of justice.

Switch off the microphone, vapourise the wordsmiths' anvils, switch the lights on and Make Art. Make the visually literate manage art education and the art institutions. Press in heavy tomes, or bibles, blazing with illuminated black letter these damned wordsmiths, like extinct specimens in Kew Gardens or the Natural History Museum. Don't let them out in bright light in case they write more vacuous words. Strike here LúciFer. Burn brightly. Come back Henri Michaux, all is forgiven. More direct action is needed 'Spurning the Verbal'. Draw on these words and be released to Draw. Turner Prize 08? Not even worth **the candle**.

Brian Marsh, December 2008.

After Words What Have The Tate
I searched
Would ArriVing HoW
Art

Can I In a gallery
It reminded
It's fashionable
Are We I wonder Prize winning

Next The projector Turn Right
Switch off the candle