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Performance: State of the Art

Can “Shock Art” and its development in time still be considered as art? Can there be an answer?

Shock art is any type of artwork that employs shock to make a point, ask a question, or purely to capture the audience's attention. These days everything has changed. The very meaning of the word ‘Art’ has become compromised. It is a common opinion within the public today that art is only valued for its ability to shock. And if it isn't shocking - it isn't art! In art, taboo images are no longer taboo. That means artists have to push further. Therefore art becomes even more shocking as time goes on. Throughout time, artists have been attempting to do one thing and that is to make us think differently.

Art has always shocked the society in which it is created. Even the likes of Manet, Van Gogh and Picasso were all criticized by the public in one way or another. One of the major paintings that caused such an outcry was Manet’s “Dejuner sur l’herbe” (Luncheon on the grass) this dated back to the mid Nineteenth century. The vulgarity of this piece caused it to be considered as “Shock Art.” In the early twentieth century Picasso seemed to be echoing this specific type of art when he painted “Les Demoiselles D’avignon” consisting of five prostitutes in a brothel. Picasso appeared to be turning his back on middle-class society and the traditional values of the time. Here Innovation caused controversy.

Photographs and paintings such as Manet's and Picasso's shield the viewer in a way; they provide a barrier so the extent of the shock effect is reduced. Marcel Duchamp, in effect, invented the term "Shock Art" (in the context that we would understand it today) when he created his infamous piece "The fountain." Can a urinal be classified as a work of art? From this moment the concept of art was irreversibly changed as a consequence. Art had effectively reinvented itself and courted wider attention than ever before.

Damien Hirst is the leader of the Young British Artists who are seen widely as being at the forefront of utilizing "Shock Art" in order to gain publicity and fame. Damien Hirst presents us with animal corpses suspended in formaldehyde. This inevitably enraged the opposing animal rights activists. This subsequently caused a large degree of shock amongst most art critics and also the public. The most renowned person to jump on the bandwagon was Tracey Emin. One of her contributions to the "Shock Art" world was her exhibition of her stained, unmade bed. There is a lot of depth and beauty in Emin's work for those who can get past the initial shock. Through expressing her emotional state, she is revealing her most intimate emotions and experiences. She uses her own life as subject-matter, touching on issues which are common to all. This allows people to view her work in an alternative manner as opposed to just dismissing it as "Shock Art."

However, disregarding the status of these artists, all were met with a degree of controversy as their ideas were seen as distasteful and disagreeable by the public, rather than interesting or inspirational.

Many people are cynical about artists today. They believe that they are only seeking to gain publicity for their own purposes. For example an exhibit as unconventional as a soiled, unmade bed, was always going to attract a media attention. Contemporary art

seems to be about the artist becoming a celebrity, and this is helped along by the media today as the media pounce on anything even remotely shocking. However, Tracey Emin did say that true art is to be found in the "depth of personal expression rather than in the drive for fame and press cuttings" ¹

Many people believe the likes of the Chapman Brothers whose work is centered around "Shock Art" should be placed at the other end of the spectrum compared to artist such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. They argue that an artist should be judged by their own skill in painting and drawing and that an Art Gallery should reflect artistic skill and talent. This was true Art. It required artistic flair and technical skill. However, Damien Hirst seems to believe that his ideas and assembling is more important than assuring people that you can draw well. Art serves as a vehicle of free speech, it is a form of communication via visual means. Many think art should still be oil on canvas and watercolours etc but what meaning does this send to people?

Art is an image that evokes an emotion, even if the emotion is disgust which is sometimes the case in some pieces of "Shock Art". The purpose of art is to inspire a response or to provoke a reaction. "Shock Art" does exactly what it aims to do, encourage debate.

The Turner Prize which is the highest profile art award in the UK is at the heart of this on-going debate. Even though many of the modern artists I have mentioned have won international acclaim and fame, some critics say their brand of "shock art" fails to reach the creative heights achieved by older artists such as Vincent Van Gogh, Monet, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso who were all controversial in their time.

¹ Tracey Emin (http://www.whitecube.com/html/artists/tre/tre_frset.html) (06/01/04)

Some people view it as ironic that in an increasingly violent world, prizes are being given in the UK for demonstrations of such offensiveness and vulgarity. The Shock rate of the Turner Prize is gradually increasing as time goes on. One art critic stated “The only real shock the Turner exhibition could produce, would be if somebody submitted an exhibit which demonstrated creative ability and intellectual depth.”²

However, if you see it from a different angle we must acknowledge the fact that the Turner Prize’s aim is about recognizing distinction in contemporary works and dealing with controversial issues. Therefore, it is only normal that these works will be challenging or pushing boundaries. “Shock Art” has worth because any art that challenges the boundaries of art can be of great value.

Another recognized piece of “shock art” includes a painting of the Virgin Mary by Chris Ofili decorated with elephant dung. Many Catholics saw this as insensitive and shocking and they were deeply offended. However, Chris Ofili claims he didn't intend to offend Roman Catholics, the point that most critics and the majority of the public seemed to miss was the importance behind his piece. Elephant dung is an African symbol of fertility, and by painting a virgin who miraculously gave birth is symbolic. The elephant is part of his African heritage and therefore the smearing of elephant dung is full of meaning and is probably not consciously iconoclastic. The artist is making a powerful statement. It is incorrect to dismiss it as simply "shock art" with no artistic value. Questions must be considered when analyzing “Shock Art.” Why would an artist produce something so disgusting or frightening? Was it a reflection of their own past? What are

² Matthew Arding
(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/turnerprize2003/story/0,13925,1075964,00.html>)
(11/01/04)

artists trying to show us? There is always some sort of intention of true Artists when submitting their work, even if it is simply controversy at the very least.

The artist's job through shock therapy is to provoke thought even among the most cynical. This will allow us to think the unthinkable. All this shock art, being introduced causes us to consider things we really would rather avoid. It reveals how closed-minded we tend to be when it comes to art and accepting the reality around us. There is no genuinely correct answer whether "Shock Art" should be classed as "Art" This is because art is subjective. What is a remarkable piece of art to one person is merely a piece of rubbish to another. The measure of the artistic worth of anything is personal. This is why there will always be an un-ending debate about this subject.

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