



TURNER
PRIZE**07**

MARK WALLINGER AND HIS AMAZING DANCING BEAR

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For an award that's focused on the relatively arcane world of contemporary art, the Turner Prize has achieved an extraordinary degree of visibility in the public sphere. It is perhaps the best-known cultural award in the UK and maybe Australia, after the Nobel Prize and in Australia's case the Archibald Prize. Considering that the Turner engages the weird and whacky bits of today's difficult art, rather than the more comprehensible areas of bad portraiture of semi-celebs or dynamite, science, politics and literature, this is quite an achievement. The Turner has become a popular concept, a brand. How did this happen? And what, if anything, does it mean?

The Turner Prize is nearly a quarter of a century old and getting on a bit for an award that has self-consciously identified itself as cleaving to the new and the cutting edge. For the first time in its history, the 2007 exhibition was staged outside the Tate in London and moved instead to Liverpool to celebrate the town becoming the European City of Culture for 2008 (along with bustling downtown Stavanger in Norway). The exhibition in the wind and waterblown Albert Dock featured works by Mike Nelson, Mark Wallinger, Zarina Bhimji and Nathan Coley, installed in what looked like a large pre-fab hut on the top floor of the converted Victorian warehouses that constitute 'Tate Liverpool'. It was a cramped and uncomfortable presentation, made more so by the contrast of a vast 'education' area bang next door which was largely empty other than for some stackable chairs, a couple of desks and a lonely black taxi-cab, which you could climb into and listen to interviews with local cabbies about the works next door. No-one has been able to satisfactorily explain this. To fill the gap that the relocation of the Prize left in the cool stone halls of the Tate Britain, the London gallery put together a history of the Turner Prize to give us a run down of all that had gone before.

There you got to walk around the large oil paintings, the bendy-over Anthony Gormley's, the dot paintings and bisected cows in formaldehyde. And the past really is a different country.

1984 is now an awfully long way away and slipping out of cultural memory. Perhaps half-remembered video footage of the Eurythmics' video clip of the glowering gaze of a grumpy sepia head looking down for the song *Sex Crime* (1984), a dodgy record made for the dodgy film version of George Orwell's eponymous dystopian novel. It was the year that the first Apple Mac went on sale, along with the first mobile phone, which weighed over a kilo. Rupert Murdoch launched Sky TV. Ethiopia was in famine and Band Aid was formed to ask: "Do they know its Christmas?" In Australia, Bob Hawke was Prime Minister and in September he was re-elected, albeit with a reduced majority; John Bannon was the Premier of South Australia and Western Australia was the last State to abolish capital punishment. Advance Australia Fair and green and gold were declared to be respectively the national anthem and colours of the nation.

Things were less colourful, go-ahead and cheery in the UK. Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party had been in power for half a decade and they had been returned with an increased majority the year before in a surge of popular support for the Falklands War. The country was in recession, unemployment was at levels unseen since the 1930s, the coalmines were being closed down and the miners' strike was just starting—a titanic struggle between organised labour and the elected government, which was to be not only the death-knell for the coal mining industry and the union movement, but for the traditional industrial manufacturing base and the working class culture of the UK. In the city of London the phenomenon of the Yuppie was beginning to be noticed. Greed was good. In the face of all this,

it was very difficult to maintain a faith in the 'progressive' model of contemporary art, the idea that by some strange occult resonance the operations of art would help prepare the way for a new and liberated society. For the self-identified hardcore of the avant-garde—the performance artists, the time-based and non-object artists—the set-backs that changes in the social and political sphere had had on the idea of their importance and utility were considerably reinforced by changes in art, where their position at the cutting edge of culture had been undermined by a return to expressionist and figurative practices and to Oh God! painting! as the Next Big Thing.

Perhaps feeling that this shift back to conservatism and commodity allowed the possibility for an institution to have a role in setting the agenda without being laughed out of polite society, the Tate Gallery's Patrons of New Art initiated the first Turner Prize. Inspired by the Booker Prize for literature, it was intended to give to the visual arts the same sort of middle class media and dinner party conversation prominence that Booker-shortlisted books enjoy. Apparently Turner had wished to set up an award to benefit young artists and this was a tardy realisation of his desire. A jury, which changed each year, nominated a number of people they considered to have made "the greatest contribution to British Art in the last twelve months". Initially this included critics and curators as well as practitioners; shortlists included Nicholas Serota, then of the Whitechapel Gallery and Robin Klassnik of Matts Gallery. Right from the outset The Turner Prize generated the confusion and a sort of sulky controversy that has reliably accompanied it ever since. People complained that they didn't know what it was for. What were the criteria for nomination? Why were younger artists put up against more established ones?



Why was Turner's name being used for this modern art rubbish? And wasn't it demeaning to see art as a competition and a prize? And how come someone, who hadn't lived in the country since 1958—Malcolm Morley—was able to scoop up the inaugural Prize?

Art critic Waldemar Januszek wrote in the first of a long line of jeremiads against the event: "The British art establishment, having already shown unforgivable ignorance and wickedness in its dealings with Turner's own bequest to the nation, is now bandying his name about in the hope of giving some spurious historical credibility to a new prize cynically concocted to promote the interest of a small group of dealers, gallery directors and critics."¹ But the Turner Prize carried on.

In 1988 a couple of things took place that were to have a profound effect on the Prize's future. Nicholas Serota was appointed the Director of the Tate, and in an old warehouse in the Surrey Docks across the city, Damien Hirst staged an exhibition of his own work, as well as that of some of his contemporaries at Goldsmiths College in a show called *Freeze*. This kickstarted the careers of the artists who were to be known as the YBAs. And in its wake, the artists, their collectors—such as Charles Saatchi—and even the college, along with the Turner Prize, were to become misty but distinct figures in the new public mythology of contemporary art.

The 1988 Turner Prize however, managed to show no sign of any awareness of these events. In the face of criticism the shortlist exhibition was abolished and a winner announced instead (Tony Cragg), who was then given a solo exhibition. But this proved unpopular too, as it made the process invisible and non-transparent. In 1989 the shortlist was re-instated but as a published list of seven 'commended' artists and then a winner announced, who was given a solo exhibition. Step forward Richard Long (who by this

time had been shortlisted or nominated four times). That didn't seem to work well either and in 1990, with its sponsors going bankrupt, the Turner Prize was cancelled.

In 1991 it returned. And now the effects of *Freeze* were making themselves felt. There was an age limit—it was deemed to be open only for artists under the age of fifty—and it was made clear that it was aiming to highlight outstanding recent work, rather than a lifetime contribution, which chimed with the feeling of generational shift. Three of the four artists shortlisted were under thirty. It had a larger prize attached—£20,000 rather than £10,000 and most importantly, it had a new sponsor—Channel 4 television, who were not only funding the Prize but broadcasting it on prime time television.

This was a brilliant move. Channel 4 was still an edgy and exciting independent broadcasting company, rather than the future hosts of Big Brother. The media context took the criticism and venom that the Prize generated and presented it as spectacle, which took on its own momentum and which became re-animated every time the award rolled around. Remarkably the arguments managed to evolve and take on new dynamics. It meant that contemporary art was in the newspapers and on the television and comedy shows and it featured as news and front page items, rather than small abstruse articles by critics stuck away unread on the arts pages or in late night broadcasts. This was novel. That each and every Turner exhibition would stir up some sort of controversy became a self-fulfilling prophecy—indeed it rapidly became a condition for a thing to be recognised as successful contemporary art in the UK, even if people, in the end, were rather vague as to quite what the controversy was about. The Turner had managed to turn the profound and vocal philistinism of the culture to its advantage and surfed on its energy.

In 1993, it was Rachel Whiteread's *House* that was the focus of popular outrage. The Artangel Project that she was nominated for had been the outrageous arts story of the year, as polarised sides discussed whether the cast of the interior of a demolished house was arrant rubbish or vaunting masterpiece. The press, most of the population and the local council hated it with a passion. Her nomination for the Turner, alongside Hannah Collins, Vong Phaophanit and Sean Scully kept things bubbling nicely. The KLF of *Last Train to Trancentral 12*, *Justified and Ancient* and other popastic hits got involved, and in an act that was probably meant to be one of Situationist provocation, but which aligned them with saloon bar bores across the country, announced that they were giving Whiteread the K Foundation £40,000 prize as the Worst British Artist. She accepted this money on the steps of the Tate under the glare of TV cameras after they threatened that if she didn't take it, it would be burned. She gave some to Shelter, a charity for the homeless and the rest was given to emerging artists.

"Knocking modern art, as hard and frequently as possible", wrote Richard Cork in *The Times* in 1993 in an article about the Turner, "is fast becoming a national media pastime. Focusing on what artists do, they never bother to ask themselves why. It is enough to wax apoplectic over an unpredictable choice of material."²

This of course was brilliant for the new wave of British practice and the outrage managed to mask that it was in so many ways a shallow and commodified branding of radicality—a modern art by Thatcher's children. The Turner Prize was central in developing the public's perception of YBAs and other new British practitioners as outrageous, innovative, street and edgy—it became a necessary and mutually beneficial symbiosis, allowing the institution the mantle of the friend of the avant-garde, while easing the passage of the young upstarts into the establishment and the academy, without this becoming at any point too obvious or overt. It was also of benefit to the significant financial interests that were focusing on these new artists, the emerging London markets and the complex shadowy exchanges that take place between the museum, the artists, the collectors and the donors. Above all, it was important for the new brand of contemporary art to be seen as innovative and as sexy and in every way opposed to all the fuddy-duddy attitudes of middle England and the past—and this is what the Turner delivered in spades.

It became so effective in doing this that in 2002 it even managed to attract condemnation from the Minister of Culture of the day. In a doomed attempt to position himself as a voice of commonsense and the people (as defined by the Murdoch press), he wrote on a message board of the 2002 exhibition (nominees Keith Tyson, Fiona Banner, Liam Gillick and

Catherine Yass), “If this is the best British artists can produce then British art is lost. It is cold mechanical, conceptual bullshit. Kim Howells. PS. The attempts at conceptualisation are particularly pathetic and symptomatic of a lack of conviction.”

This thoughtful intervention marked the highpoint of the Turner’s ability to dominate dinner party conversations. It was also the last moment that it has been able to do this. Since then everybody involved has tried to keep it up, keep the splutter and the excitement going, shrieking at Grayson Perry—pottery and transvestitism—or as the *Daily Mail* had it: “Pornographic Potter Gunning for Turner Prize” and attempting bulging eyes and a “this modern art rubbish” response to Simon Starling’s *Shed/Boat/Shed*, but their heart wasn’t in it. Everybody knows that it’s not quite the same. The vast world of contemporary practice that the Turner Prize helped inflate has become too big and echoing for the artists to fill. The need to find three or four artists each year, who have done something ‘outstanding’ has become a greater and greater strain, more and more obviously impossible. The last few exhibitions have been thinner, lacklustre, with any interesting work lost in the enveloping miasma of dull work by dull artists. There’s been an increasing dearth of glitz and pizzazz. Channel 4 has ceased to be the sponsor; it was initially replaced by Gordon’s Gin, then by some obscure property fund. For the 2007 exhibition, even the Stuckists—a sad little pro-‘real’ art protest group, who have been as reliable as spring in their self-promotion, couldn’t be bothered to turn up to protest.

The last exhibition felt like it could be the end of the Turner Prize. It went through the motions but it couldn’t quite get it up. Nelson and Wallinger are very good artists indeed, both of them already have exciting and significant bodies of work, as well as the feeling that only perhaps now are they fully hitting their stride. Either of these artists deserved the Prize. But it felt almost as if they had been brought out especially to try and give a bit of gravitas and a boost to the show after the recent run of lacklustre exhibitions. It is significant that both Wallinger and Nelson had been previously nominated, and Wallinger was also getting a little close to the age barrier. The other two artists exhibiting in Liverpool however, were make-weights. Bhimji helped address the Turner’s well attested historical determination to under-represent women—there have been only three women winners in its entire history—and Coley’s inclusion was frankly a bit of a mystery. He is by no means the worst artist working in the UK, but outside conspiracy theories—and his nomination triggered a baroque effusion of these—nobody could make head or tail of his work’s inclusion, or for it having been ‘outstanding’ or even particularly interesting over the previous twelve months. Wallinger was shortlisted for his fabulous *State Britain* installation,



the reconstruction of Brain Haw’s anti-war protest. This is one of the most thrilling works to have been made in the last half decade, but the fact that it was commissioned and shown by Tate Britain should perhaps have disbarred it from being the work that gained him the nomination. He had other exhibitions that year which would have done as well. The work in the exhibition—a cute video projection of the artist in a bear suit in Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie at night, *Sleeper* (2004–05)—had already been bought for the Tate Collection, which added to the feeling of some sort of slight murk—as if someone wasn’t paying full attention to how things might be seen. Nelson was listed for his exhibitions at Matts Gallery and the Frieze Art Fair. Because it is difficult to challenge either of these artists’ worth without coming across as a barking flat-earther, they didn’t really gain that much coverage; little or no Tracey Emin style ‘unmade bed’ scandal was generated in the media. After the announcement of the prize going to Wallinger, and his ‘bring the troops home, trust the people’ acceptance speech, there was short lived attempt to get hot under the collar about the *State Britain*, anti-Iraq War link and the strangeness and fundamentalism of Brian Haw. Disappointingly this came more often than not from members of the (contrarian) left; people whom one would have thought sympathetic to Wallinger’s wider politic (and he is one of the most political artists working today), but who have found themselves washed up on the wilder shores of society through their support of the Iraq War, and who couldn’t stand the fact that the ‘wrong’ side, (i.e. those opposed to the War) were now getting the imprimatur of the Tate and Turner. Some of this was vicious; the ex-editor of the *Daily Express* unforgivably accused Wallinger of being a ‘thief’, as

she seemed unable to tell the difference between an original and a reconstruction. But given the muffled silence that still surrounds the Iraq War in the polity and the media, even these privileged voices could not pierce the fog of general indifference. Even getting Dennis Hopper to present the Prize didn’t seem to get the column inches that you felt were expected. The art critics of the ‘quality’ press, robbed of bigger issues to engage with, amused themselves instead by dismembering the work of Nathan Coley with such a focus and staggering viciousness that it made you wonder quite what bizarre deed he must have done at the press launch to get up their noses to such an extent. Pissing in their punch wouldn’t do it.

The Turner Prize has been extraordinarily successful. But it seems to have lost the confidence that it once had. It might be because it’s the end of the brand and it finds itself stranded between edgy and establishment ideas, or maybe because the art world that the Turner Prize has helped build suddenly seems dodgier, more contingent and questionable than it did even six months ago. But walking away from the gallery in Liverpool, you couldn’t help but feel that no one would be terribly upset—or even surprised—if the stately amazing dancing bear moving pensively through the empty galleries didn’t turn out to be the Turner’s final turn.

Notes

¹ Waldemar Januscek, *The Guardian*, 6 November, 1984

² Richard Cork, *The Times*, 23 November, 1993

Page 44: Mark Wallinger, *Sleeper* (video still), 2004
 Photo courtesy the artist and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London
 Above left: Mark Wallinger, *State Britain* (Installation view), 2007
 Photo courtesy the artist and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London; photography Sam Drake, Tate Photography
 Above right: Martin Creed, *Work No. 227: The lights going on and off* (installation view), 2000
 Photo courtesy the artist and Cabinet, London