

Yes . . . But Is It Art?

Morley Safer and Murphy Brown Take on the Experts

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Twice in the past year, millions of American viewers had the pleasure of seeing the contemporary art establishment get its comeuppance on prime-time network television.

First, there was the segment entitled "Yes . . . But Is It Art?" last September 19 on the long-running CBS newsmagazine "60 Minutes," which exposed the fraudulence of the contemporary work hyped by most dealers, critics, and curators--work ranging from so-called abstract art to a "piece" consisting of two basketballs submerged in a fish tank. Morley Safer, the intrepid reporter for the segment, aptly derided the art world's impenetrable Artspeak, and deprecated the status-seeking collectors of such work by invoking the old adage "There's a sucker born every minute."

Four months later, on the January 17 episode of CBS's popular "Murphy Brown" show, the sit-com's fictional TV anchorwoman also mocked the fashionable art world, including its pseudo-artists. Undoubtedly inspired by the "60 Minutes" segment and its aftermath, the "Murphy Brown" episode was as trenchant a social satire as any play by Molière--a witty denuding of intellectual pretension and charlatanry.

In one scene, Murphy, facing off against art "experts" on a PBS talk show (a scene modeled on Morley Safer's appearance on the "Charlie Rose" show), ridiculed a work entitled "Commode-ity," which was nothing more than an actual toilet affixed to a wall. The sit-com writer did not exaggerate. "Commode-ity" was no more bizarre than the real-life commodities of the postmodernist whose "artworks" consisting of urinals and sinks had been featured on "60 Minutes"--or than the urinal that the early modernist Marcel Duchamp presented in 1917 as an artwork entitled "Fountain."

In another scene, equally true to life, Murphy succeeded in passing off as a mature work by an unknown artist a painting by her eighteen-month-old son. The scene might well have been inspired by an event reported in the Manchester *Guardian* in February of last year. According to the *Guardian*, a "blob"-like painting by a four-year-old child was bought by a collector for 295 after being exhibited in the annual

show of the Manchester Academy of Fine Arts. The child's mother had submitted the work as a joke, and a panel of six experts, unaware of the age of the "artist," had selected it because they thought it displayed "a certain quality of colour balance, composition and technical skill."

In the final analysis, real life has been less satisfying than the sit-com, however. There is no reason to hope, for instance, that the Manchester Academy of Fine Arts will soon alter its selection criteria. When informed that a work by a four-year-old had been exhibited, the president of the academy was unperturbed. "The art of children often has a very uncluttered quality which adults often strive to gain," she explained to BBC Radio 4, "so I don't feel in the least embarrassed about it." She then added, without flinching at the implicit contradiction of her expert panel's judgment of the qualities they discerned in the work: "Technical skill can get in the way of instinctive response."

Closer to home, the heated media debate that followed the airing of "Yes . . . But Is It Art?" on "60 Minutes" fizzled out in a series of ill-considered letters by Morley Safer to the *New York Times* and other periodicals, and in his ineffectual sparring with Artspeak experts on the "Charlie Rose" show. Safer lost the debate, not because the purported experts' arguments made any sense but because he, despite the best of intentions, had no consistent argument at all.

In contrast, Murphy Brown prevailed, through witty barbs and an unshakable confidence in her own common sense. In a triumphant moment, Murphy's co-anchor had earlier declared: "People have been waiting for someone to blow the whistle on this so-called art and the business that feeds on it. It's a house of cards, and perhaps your piece will help bring it down." As another of Murphy's colleagues observed, she had won allies even among viewers who generally disagreed with her stance on other issues. Clearly, the question of what art is cuts across customary political and social lines.

Nevertheless, it will take far more than an exposé on "60 Minutes" or an episode of "Murphy Brown" to topple this house of cards. Too much money and prestige are invested in it for its proponents to yield without a fierce struggle. Major cultural institutions and corporate sponsors--not to mention countless "artists," dealers, collectors, curators, and critics--have their fortunes and reputations at stake.

What is needed to sweep the art world clean is not merely an intuitive sense of what art *isn't*, but a well-reasoned and clearly articulated understanding of what art *is*. Unfortunately, one cannot look to the majority of today's academic philosophers

of art for guidance. The profession, by its own admission, is in a state of confusion on this question, owing in part to the on-going proliferation of what it euphemistically refers to as "unconventional" art forms. Indeed, the American Society for Aesthetics lamented in a winter 1993 position paper that the central question of aesthetics--What is art?--has become "increasingly intractable," with the result that the very viability of the field as a philosophic discipline is in jeopardy.

Because philosophers have shrunk from defining the concept, the terms "art" and "artist" are up for grabs. It has even become common for critics to resort to such absurdly circular propositions as "If an artist says it's art, it's art" (Roberta Smith in the *New York Times*) and "Dances are dances and ballets are ballets simply because people who call themselves choreographers say they are" (Jack Anderson, also in the *Times*).

One thing is certain, however, and cannot be repeated often enough. Art, like everything else in the universe, has an identity, which can be objectively defined. An essential attribute of art, we maintain, is *meaning*--objective and readily discernible meaning. If a work makes *no sense at all* to an ordinary person without the intervention of an expert, it is outside the realm of art.

That this fundamental truth was conveyed, albeit implicitly, on two of America's most popular television programs bodes well indeed for the future.

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