

## **TURNER PRIZE: Most prestigious— yet also controversial**

Since its inception, the Turner Prize has been synonymous with new British art – and with lively debate. For while the prize has helped to build the careers of a great many young British artists, it has also generated controversy. Yet it has survived endless media attacks, changes of terms and sponsor, and even a year of suspension, to arrive at its current status as one of the most significant contemporary art awards in the world. How has this controversial event shaped the development of British art? What has been its role in transforming the new art being made in Britain into an essential part of the country’s cultural landscape?

### **The Beginning**

The Turner Prize was set up in 1984 by the Patrons of New Art (PNA), a group of Tate Gallery benefactors committed to raising the profile of contemporary art.<sup>1</sup> The prize was to be awarded each year to “the person who, in the opinion of the jury, has made the greatest contribution to art in Britain in the previous twelve months”. Shortlisted artists would present a selection of their works in an exhibition at the Tate Gallery. The brainchild of Tate Gallery director Alan Bowness, the prize was conceived with the explicit aim of stimulating public interest in contemporary art, and promoting contemporary British artists through broadening the audience base. At that time, few people were interested in contemporary art. It rarely featured in non-specialist publications, let alone in the everyday conversations of ordinary members of the public.

The Turner Prize was named after the famous British painter J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), and stirred up all kinds of criticism and comment right from the start. Some complained that Turner himself would hardly have approved; others that the idea of a national competition was demeaning to art. Many, moreover, were suspicious of the authority and the neutrality of the award, especially given that the first sponsor, PNA member Oliver Prenn, remained anonymous for the duration of his sponsorship (1984–7). Another concern voiced then (and since) was whether personal and commercial interests might not influence the jury members’ decision-making.

Misgivings turned to outrage when the first award went to Malcolm Morley, an artist who had lived in the United States since 1958, and who did not even attend the

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2000, the Tate Gallery became Tate, a family of four galleries: Tate Britain (formerly the Tate Gallery, established in 1897) and Tate Modern (2000) in London, Tate Liverpool (1988) and Tate St Ives (1993).

ceremony to receive his prize. ‘How much has this US-based artist contributed to the British art scene during those years?’ came the cry. Doubts were also expressed as to how the award could have any meaningful effect on the reputations of well-established artists such as Lucian Freud and Richard Hamilton. Gilbert and George were already well on their way towards the peak of their career when they won the prize in 1986, raising the question of whether the prize was merely an acknowledgement of lifelong achievement rather than an active championing of the art of the time.

### **Ten Years of Trial and Error**

It would take the Turner Prize ten years of trial and error to consolidate and refine its terms, conditions, and format. In 1987, to address the public’s evident uncertainty regarding the intention of the prize, the wording of the terms was changed: instead of to the person who has made ‘the greatest’ contribution, the prize would go to the person who has made an ‘outstanding’ contribution to art in Britain in the previous year. Doing away with the idea of a ‘greatest contribution’ reduced the risk of the prize turning into a lifetime achievement award, and as a result put emphasis back on to recent developments.

The arrival of the Tate’s new director, Nicholas Serota, in 1988, led to an overhaul of the Turner Prize terms and conditions. In response to criticism of the combative and potentially humiliating shortlisting process, it was decided that the shortlist would not be published, and only the winner would be announced. A solo exhibition of the winner would be shown at the Tate Gallery in the following year. While the previous set-up was unpopular, the new arrangement caused great indignation. The public and the critics felt deprived of the opportunity to compare or ridicule the works of the contenders, and deprived of the fun of guessing – or betting on – who would win. Indeed, without the eager (if quarrelsome) public and media engagement, the Turner Prize seemed to have lost its impetus. The revised format restored a certain dignity, and drew attention to the winner, but it failed to convey that artist’s achievements effectively to the wider public.

In 1990, the Turner Prize competition had to be called off, following the bankruptcy of the sponsor, American investment company Drexel Burnham Lambert. The award returned in 1991 with a new sponsor – the national television station Channel 4 – and another change in the terms. An age limit of fifty was set, to avoid the incongruity of pitting young artists against older and more established artists. While some thought

the jury took this to extreme when the shortlist that year included three artists still only in their twenties, this change was mostly welcomed, and further directed the award's attention to the younger generation of British artists, clarifying the vision of the prize as celebrating new developments in contemporary art and championing emerging British artists.

The partnership with Channel 4 was invaluable in increasing awareness and understanding of contemporary art, thus serving well the initial aim of the prize. Prime-time television coverage was guaranteed, itself an endorsement of contemporary art in the eyes of the wider public. The media coverage also very effectively promoted the younger and lesser-known artists. The shortlist was now limited to four, and the exhibition space was greatly expanded, allowing each artist a whole gallery for their selected works to be unveiled at Tate Britain (or, in 2007, Tate Liverpool) a month prior to the televised award ceremony. The total prize money was also increased in 1991, from £10,000 to £20,000 (it would double again to £40,000 in 2004). The up-sizing of every aspect of the prize reconfirmed its status as a hugely significant national event. Recent publicity campaigns made viewer participation a priority. Now inviting viewers to 'judge for yourself', the prize sought their active involvement: encouraging them to approach the artworks and learn more about the artists; to record their impressions and give feedback; hence, to draw conclusions for themselves.

### **Art at the Turner Show**

Such public participation stimulated discussion on art-related topics, and debate of a kind that used to be considered an elitist activity. Now anyone and everyone was starting to ponder big questions such as 'What constitutes (great) art?'; 'Can anything be art?'; 'What is it to be an artist?' etc.

Drawing unprecedented numbers of visitors to the exhibition in 1995 was Damien Hirst's *Mother and Child, Divided* (1993), an installation piece featuring a cow and a calf, bisected and separately preserved in four glass-walled tanks filled with formaldehyde solution. The work provoked a mixture of responses; a viewer might be moved by its contemplation of separation, blood-ties and intimacy, for instance, or disgusted by the sight of animals' innards, or by their presentation as art – or all of the above. As well as frenzied tabloid excitement, that year's Turner Prize also generated nationwide debate on serious topics, such as the role of the artist, and the concept of beauty.

The exhibition was similarly hijacked in 1999 by Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998), the artist's own unmade bed, complete with accompanying bottles and fag ends and other personal debris. This painfully confessional evocation of sex, sickness, and loss caused an avalanche of critical comment. *My Bed* has become so well known that most people presumed that Emin had won the prize, whereas in fact she was only a finalist; the prize that year was awarded to filmmaker Steve McQueen.

In 2001, the question 'But is it art?' raged once again, in response to Martin Creed's *Work No. 227* (2000), a conceptual piece comprising a light automatically turning on and off in an empty room. The work – and Creed's win – drew widespread attention to the growing significance of conceptualism within contemporary British art practice. It seemed that the Turner Prize was now routinely associated with the most radical current practice in the British art world.

Subsequent Turner Prize shows have produced their share of outrage and notoriety. In 2003, Jake and Dinos Chapman showed a sexually explicit bronze sculpture of blow-up sex dolls, as well as their shockingly 'rectified' set of Goya prints by defacing them. That year's award was received by Grayson Perry's alter ego, Claire, who proclaimed, "It's about time a transvestite potter won the Turner Prize!" The Turner Prize has often thrown up surprises, and there can be no doubt that the work displayed has been varied in the extreme.

Tagging British art 'New! Young! Hot!' (and of course 'Cool'), the Turner Prize has not only overseen but furthered artistic development, through its institutional authority and the validation that it confers. In 1996, Douglas Gordon beat the favourite, painter Gary Hume, to become the first video artist to win the prize. The following year, when the award went to Gillian Wearing, who showed her video work *60 Minutes Silence* (1996), it seemed to confirm that new media art had gained wider acceptance. In fact, the new art of the 1990s encompassed a variety of media. Through an increase in the use of photography, film and video, and through the incorporation of everyday objects, it might be said that art during this period became more directly expressive of the predicaments of everyday life.

Since its turbulent early years, the Turner Prize has found a more stable footing and continues its mission to expand the audience for contemporary art. For the most part, it has succeeded in focusing both media and public attention on art developments, despite the scandal and controversy – even while the latter have been a major reason

for the media and public attention in the first place. Thus publicity, hype and outrage have played a huge part in the prize's significance and success. The contribution of the Turner Prize is undeniable: propelling contemporary art into ordinary people's daily gossip, their tea-time discussions and dinner-party chats, urging them to step into the gallery to have a look for themselves. Provoking debate and public interest in contemporary British art, the Turner Prize has become widely recognised as one of the most successful, important and prestigious awards for the visual arts in the world.