

Eyes on the Prize

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN ON *WORK OF ART*

“LIFE IS AN UNENDING CONTEST,” Frantz Fanon concluded in his famous book *The Wretched of the Earth*. What Fanon could not have predicted is how entertaining that contest would be for twenty-first-century spectators watching from the safe remove of their sofas—or, moreover, how the atomization of this mortal competition into its constituent parts would go on to fill so many hours of television programming. Among the reality-based television contests we have now witnessed in prime time are those involving vacation travel, matchmaking, cooking, corporate takeovers, fashion design, the leisure time of the rich, parental substitutions, and drug rehabilitation. It comes as little surprise, then, that Bravo finally got around to producing an hour-long competition in visual art with the aim, as the predictably operative subtitle suggested, of discovering “the next great artist.” The question of why it took reality television so long to generate a show on one of the most overtly creative fields, with plenty of money, glamour, and ridiculousness built into its foundations—even after, say, green-lighting *Shear Genius*—might be the simple fact that for general audiences, watching someone get a haircut is more interesting than watching a painting dry. (In fact, Jeffrey Deitch did spearhead an art-based reality show called *Artstar* in 2006, which aired on the short-lived cable network Gallery HD, but this program lacked the explicit drama of elimination rounds and failed to focus on the personal sagas of its contestants.)

For those who were not glued to their television sets from the premiere of *Work of Art* in early June, the premise involved fourteen artists of various races, sexes, ages, levels of education, technical skills, and degrees of telegenicity. These hopefuls set out each episode to produce task-based artworks focused on a certain theme (“shocking” art, a book cover, a portrait of a competitor, an interactive public work, etc.) and then exhibited the results in a gallery, while a regular panel of judges (critic Jerry Saltz, gallerists Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Bill Powers, and host China Chow, with a dashing Simon de Pury acting as beneficent mentor) and a guest (Will Cotton, Jon Kessler, Richard Phillips, and Andres Serrano, among others) gave a kind of “crit” redolent of grad school final theses. The reward in this hyper-edited version of reality: one hundred thousand dol-

lars and a solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. This was the *Project Runway* formula adapted to the Chelsea art set.

But whereas fashion trades as much in the mercurial élan of cultured taste as it does in the more comprehensible logic of form and function, contemporary art operates in a realm in which judging “what works,” as Chow regularly opined before the critiques of the losing contestants, is provisional and instinctive—tricky, even for a pro like Saltz, to bring to the television-game-show context. Prior to its airing and even in the first few episodes, many New York artists were disgusted, disconcerted, or bemused by the idea of contemporary art being rendered as a crafty, unthreatening, you’ve-got-until-midnight-to-make-a-masterpiece form of entertainment. (It didn’t help matters that one of the show’s executive producers was Sarah Jessica Parker, whose commercialization of Manhattan into some kind of consequence-free fairy tale here found a more specific target.) But as the episodes ticked down to a sort of artist-versus-artist high noon, what was evidenced by *Work of Art* was not that it reduced or jeopardized the vauntedly enigmatic status of the art world. Rather, the show demonstrated that we have wandered so far from any conception of an avant-garde operating beyond the boundaries of fast, star-making consumerism that programs like this one are no threat at all. The real shock might be that *Work of Art* didn’t shock. Indeed, in the particularly ludicrous (and undeniably tame) episode dedicated to “shocking” art, the judges were reduced to critiquing a misspelling of *fellatio*.

That said, art in crash circumstances can make for wonderful entertainment—take these colorful comments peppering the episodes: “I’ve been around too much and been through too much to have some stuck-up art pussy tell me life lessons”; “I don’t see how my gastrointestinal problems factor into heaven and hell”; “Jackie, do you masturbate standing up?” And it can occasionally produce glimmers of brilliance. You may have loved to hate the handsome, opinionated, OCD-added installation artist Miles Mendenhall, but his



Work of Art, 2010, TV show on Bravo. Simon de Pury and Peregrine Honig. Production still.

pieces are worthy of their recent presentation at New York’s Half Gallery, which Powers co-owns; fellow finalist Peregrine Honig has also deservedly received a gallery show, at Dwight Hackett Projects in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Sadly, Abdi Farah’s “prize” exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, which closes this month, was met with unfavorable reviews—though the final product seems almost beside the point.

Saltz has said that he couldn’t resist the offer of being a judge, simply for the opportunity to conduct art criticism on television. And he and Powers did a commendable job of trying to evaluate various artistic endeavors in their allotted sound-bite-size sentences. Overall, though, the judges seemed to lean on outdated critical bromides that value self-expression—“Where are you in this piece?” Chow asked one contestant of his work—despite this being a contest that put the artists on a timer and far outside their media comfort zones. Such assessments weren’t wrong, necessarily. The problem is that they failed, in this context, to enlighten, edify, or even establish a deeper dialogue about what “what works” really means. (Saltz, to his own credit, has performed the astonishing *deus ex machina* of critiquing his own criticism on NYMag.com.) Nonetheless, if *Work of Art* is picked up for future seasons, its fate may mirror that of another popular reality-show competition, *America’s Next Top Model*. Eventually, no one remembers the winners who receive their one-year modeling contracts and fade into obscurity. The judges themselves become the real stars. □

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN IS A NEW YORK-BASED CRITIC AND EDITOR AT LARGE OF *INTERVIEW* MAGAZINE.