Washington debates: modern art or junk?

MIT is not the only place in the world where modern sculpture has produced such large quantities of junk art. The week before Tony Smith's For Marjorie became the latest addition to the campus collection, Henry Fales, a contributing editor of The New Republic, magazine, arrived at that publication's office in Washington, DC to 'sack' so-called "art" on the sidewalk, which he evidently did not find artistically appealing. Mr. Fales's comments, which appeared in the May 14 issue of the magazine, is reported below, along with a picture of the offending artwork, by permission of The New Republic, copyright 1977.

I publish here a photograph of a piece of contemporary sculputure that was dumped last week on the sidewalk outside this office. It cost $8000 from the owners of the building, and a matching grant of $8000 from the National Endowment for the Arts, much of whose spending is for the arts, is little more than arip-off for artists from the public treasury. This ugly box of retrieveable junk is monstrous, it is punk, and at a guess, $1000. But if it is junk, it is no more so than the language which the artist, himself, Ed McGowin, and Jo Ann Lewis writing about it in the Washington Post, use to describe it. The language in which contemporary art is discussed today, has become incomprehensible because it is describing something that does not really exist, that has no validity as art. For too long we have been intimidated by the fear that if we do not "appreciate" all contemporary art, we must be philistines. But few of these artists are Gilead's whose genius we are not recognizing, and postively will squeal in wonder at the junk to be found in the cellars of the Museum of Modern Art or junk.

I have turned down many applicants who would be unacceptable for graduate student. We have made some good points and you will not have completed an undergraduate degree. MIT is not the one place in the world where modern sculpture has produced junk. When Picasso painted Modern Art in New York when it opens, he was asking for an approval of the National Endowment for the Arts, much of whose spending is for the arts. Dali himself would be said by many to have crossed the line, and it is a charlatanry that is too often being focused on the public today in the name of art.

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