

## Objects in the Mirror #14: Bad Art

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October 2006  
Last Updated March 2007

Viewing the bad art created by someone you love, by a close friend or family member, is probably the most devastating trauma you will ever face. It can happen anytime, anyplace; at work, on a pleasant social outing, during your most sacred holidays, even in the security of your own home. You may even be asked, "So, what do you think?" However prepared you think you are, however often you've reviewed protocols or rehearsed proper procedures, in this situation you will experience the extreme outer limits of stress.

In the initial explosive, adrenaline-pumping panic, your whole sad, unfulfilled life may suddenly flash before your eyes. You may engage in pointless physical violence or make a sudden desperate attempt at suicide, by leaping from nearby windows or banging your head to a bloody pulp on the nearest available wall. Interestingly, studies indicate that the wall chosen by such head-banging suicides is almost always the wall on which the bad art is displayed.

Panic will soon give way to powerful feelings of disgust, confusion, and anger. If the artist persists in drawing your attention to the bad art, and asking for your honest opinion, you are likely to experience psychosomatic physical symptoms such as nausea, dizziness, tightness in the throat, dry heaves and vomiting, inflamed sinuses, epileptic seizure, dry-mouth, a red scaly rash that covers your entire body, halitosis, sometimes called bad breath, auditory and visual hallucinations, a burning sensation while urinating, hot flashes, cold sores, catatonic stupor, coma and death.

You may become angry at God, cursing his name, challenging his authority, blaming him for a world where the innocent must suffer the agony of seeing and responding to bad art. You may condemn the unfairness of a universe where some are born so talented that their indifferent doodles make everyone want to sing, while others labor all their lives at creative efforts which elicit only horrified cringing. Stranded and alone in the vast, empty black void of your socially awkward situation, you may find yourself rejecting God's alleged cosmic love as a ridiculous anthropomorphic sham.

Many dive headfirst into the dry well of self-hatred. They hold themselves responsible for the artist's problem, remembering some long ago fork in the road of destiny where they might have intervened and prevented the tragedy, with a single word, a friendly chat or a discreet trip to the dumpster. At the very least, most of us feel we are not being loyal or faithful, especially since the bad artist is a friend or relative, someone who perhaps provided wine, cheese, maybe cocaine, someone who perhaps even had sex with us, perhaps even tolerable or above average sex.

It's common to cling to a desperate, irrational hope that somehow the art is not really bad at all. Often this pathology is expressed in improbable lies like "It's interesting," or "I like it." You may convince yourself, against all evidence of mind and body, that what you see involves talent, novelty, or a creative breakthrough. In most cases, this denial spontaneously fades as the bad artist drops broad hints that perhaps someone should buy a piece and take it home to treasure forever.

Those who somehow survive their initial encounter must then face the difficult question of how to respond to the bad artist over the long term. don't expect any hugs of gratitude, or warm, fuzzy thank-you notes, for trying to help someone who makes bad art. They inevitably deny they even have a problem.

Typically, bad artists are extremely defensive and come up with elaborate and preposterous rationales for their work which they believe are absolutely convincing. They may lash out at the loved one who suggests they need help, screaming things like, "You wouldn't know good art if it bit you on the ass." they're adept at redirecting the spotlight on the people and situations around them: "You like Giacometti, so what the fuck do you know?" They will drag out their resumes and their degrees and talk about the positive feedback they've gotten. "Well, in case you don't remember, Mr. Big Shot Art Critic, Professor Dumpworthy told me in the Spring '99 crit that my work beautifully articulated an obsolete intellectual position! Beautifully articulated! Does that sound like bad art to you, Mr. Electrical Engineer, whose idea of an aesthetic thrill is checking out the floor coverings at Home Depot? Well, does it?"

Bad artists cannot see the obvious, because it hurts too much. They can't help it. There is something wrong with them and they have no control. Because their resistance is so intense, most need an outside force to break through their denial. Very few will decide to stop making bad art on their own. It's up to you to move forward through your own pain, fear and revulsion. Waiting is not the answer. Waiting can waste years of life, and pollutes the world with grotesque things no one should ever see.

don't make excuses for the bad art. Try confronting the bad artist, but only when they're not exhibiting. Approach them in a gentle way. don't nag, and don't burst out laughing at absurd claims for the work. Talk non-judgmentally about your feelings. Point out problems that the art has caused, but do it in a caring way.

Most people in your position eventually find it necessary to organize an intervention. Participants should include family, friends, and anybody else who thinks the art sucks. Make arrangements to have the entire event professionally videotaped, because in years to come, it will make for some hilarious viewing at family get-togethers.

Ambush bad artists when they least expect it. don't hesitate to lie to get them where you want them. Tried-and-true ruses include, "I want you to meet a wealthy collector who's interested in your work," "Do you know anybody who could use some free weed?" and "I have half a ham sandwich in the fridge." Quickly hogtie them, and perhaps inject them with animal tranquilizers to ensure their cooperation. Have plenty of tough nylon rope and the appropriate medications on hand.

After they're subdued, confront the bad artist as a group, describing his or her creations and how they have affected each of you. Specialists emphasize that love and sincerity must be displayed at all times by the intervention participants, and that group members should express their opinions in a non-threatening, non-blaming manner. An example of a sincere, loving, non-threatening, non-blaming statement might be, "I love you and that is why it hurts me so much to see you stay up all night making your ugly art abortions that no one likes, and which are only fit to be burned, or thrown down the sewer. When I look at your art I get sick, really physically sick, but if I were to vomit up my shrimp enchiladas on this grotty linoleum floor, it would look better than the stuff you're making. You are a worthless person and you don't deserve to live if you keep hurting everyone with your bad art addiction. I love you."

The group needs to list specific consequences if the bad artist continues to create. Project how their behavior will affect the future. For example, if they continue to make their work, you will divorce them. Or you won't allow them to call you. Or they can no longer live in your house. Or they will be fired from their job. Or you will poison their food. Or you will take their pets to a remote area and abandon them. Or you will shove their hands into a whirring garbage disposal. Or their family will be killed. Or their family will beg to be killed, will long for death, but no death will come for them, because of the bad, bad art. Whatever you tell them can't be a bluff. you've got to be willing to make good on your threats.

Ideally, after everybody has ganged up on the bad artist verbally, the group gradually introduces and escalates some shocking physical antagonism. Professionals call this therapeutic procedure "giving them something to cry about." Let them face the consequences. If you don't punish them, they'll have no consequences, and that means they'll have no motivation to change. The necessary crescendo of pathological violence typically involves the destruction of significant quantities of the oeuvre in question, often by fire, and the crazed, tearful recanting of an entire aesthetic belief system as the bad artist, under torture, renounces his or her little hobby forever.

There is a future, filled with a bright, hope-like substance, for those brave enough to challenge the disease of bad art. Healing a bad artist requires incredible strength, caring and patience, but the effort is usually worth it if there's a chance you won't have to pretend to like their crap anymore. Freedom from that terrible burden is the first step toward your own healing. When you stop lying, to the artists and to yourself, you will regain your self-respect.

One day you'll wake up and this nightmare will be behind you. Birds will be singing, people will smile and the world will make sense once again. You'll find that you can then remember the bad art without pain, though you may still experience some involuntary shuddering.

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