

## Are you a 'Culture Vulture'?

Last year, as part of the UK/Japan 2008 festival, Tokyo received a very unusual visitor, or perhaps two visitors. A calf split in two and preserved in a pair of glass cases filled with formaldehyde was part of a retrospective featuring winners of Britain's Turner prize (awarded annually to British visual artists aged 50 and under). The prize has become notorious for its daring and often shocking winners. The work's creator Damien Hirst is the most visible (risible, some would say) of a crop of modern artists that include graffiti artist Banksy whose witty street art and mystery identity have given him cult status and Anthony Gormley whose army of amorphous figurines recalled the terracotta warriors of Xian.

Hirst's bizarre conception alarmed some but was a hit with the British farmer's union who praised the artist for raising the profile of British lamb. It was exhibited at Roppongi Hills in Tokyo and attracted a huge swarm (if that's the word) of people who might be happy to hear themselves described as 'culture vultures'.

'Culture vulture' is a light-hearted term for anyone with a serious interest in art and high culture – the kind of person who scans the listings magazines for film premieres, gallery openings, concerts and exhibitions. It's one of a steadily growing cluster of bright, bouncy phrases featuring a rhyming pair of two syllable words (other examples are 'lovely jubbly' an exclamation meaning 'great' or 'fantastic' and 'yummy mummy' a term which describes an unusually attractive young mother.

Britain has always prided itself as being an attractive destination for culture vultures with its museums (still mainly free), concert halls, galleries and growing number of arts festivals but the trend these days for those at the cutting edge is for large scale outdoor art. Most recently, the aforementioned Gormley has invited members of the public (with nothing better to do presumably) to stand on the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square for an hour at a time. The project will continue 24 hours a day for a hundred consecutive days and, if nothing else, may be slightly more fun than watching the pigeons. Elsewhere, another Turner prizewinner Mark Wallinger will erect a massive white horse (33 times life-size), which will stand close to the Eurostar international station in Swanscombe in Kent and give travellers something to look out for on their way to Paris. The project has already been dubbed 'The Angel of the South' in response to the already standing 'Angel of the North' by Gormley (again) which overlooks the A1 motorway in Gateshead. Visitors to Liverpool should watch out for yet another Turner prize alumni Tracey Emin's sculpture 'Roman Standard' featuring a small bird atop a four-meter high bronze pole.

But for those who believe the UK's avant-gardists are breaking any new ground with these eye-catching, al fresco masterworks it's worth taking a trip to Uffington on the Berkshire downs where a prehistoric hill figure of a white horse is still visible or the village of Cerne Abbas in Dorset where you can see a chalk drawing (believed to be at least 400 years old) of a huge and (very) naked man wielding a club. It is believed that if a woman spends the night sitting on the 'rude man' as he is known she will increase her chances of becoming pregnant.

Incidentally, not all of Hirst's zany inspirations have proved as successful as his pickled mammalian. He once opened a restaurant in fashionable Notting Hill called 'Pharmacy' which looked exactly like an old-fashioned chemists shop but it closed in 2003 partly because too many people were coming in and asking for flu medicine, sun cream, contact lens solution and the like. Sometimes even our brightest artists are just too clever for their own good.

Written by Philip Patrick

Copyright © British Council, All right Reserved.