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Flash the trash ... Skip by David Batchelor is the centrepiece of Brighton's 2012 House festival. Photograph: Bernard Mills

Beauty and the bin: why David Batchelor's Skip is not rubbish

Critics have been quick to trash Batchelor's glow-in-the-dark public work of art, but he's inviting us to see the beauty and magic of the discarded, to notice the wonder that children see

Modern art is rubbish! Artist puts £95,000 skip in town centre! Cart this junk away! I summarise, but this is the general tenor of reports in certain sections of the press this week on David Batchelor's Skip, a temporary public work of art unveiled as the centrepiece of Brighton's 2012 House festival.

Skip is a, well it's a skip, and it is illuminated by yellow fluorescent strips whose glow mystically transforms it from a neglected ordinary thing into the magic stuff of art. Although that's not how the papers see it. "Taxpayer forks out £95,000 for this 'artistic skip' to 'make people think'", protests Daily Mail Reporter below a picture of the work whose banality is meant to be obvious, while the Mirror asks philosophically: "A load of rubbish?"

To which my answer is – no, it does not look like rubbish at all. It looks like a very elegant work of art. With a flick of a switch, Batchelor invites the passerby to look at the overlooked, to pay attention to the unwanted, forgotten, discarded stuff that gathers up all about us. The entropy, that is the amount of rubbish, in the universe is always increasing according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. We don't want to see all that entropy, so we put it in skips. Artists, though, have a habit of reclaiming it, seeing it afresh. In 1920 Man Ray took a photograph for Marcel Duchamp of dust "breeding" on the surface of Duchamp's work *The Large Glass* – an artistic celebration of entropy. The New York artist Joseph Cornell trawled junkshops looking for old dolls, forgotten photographs and bric-a-brac with which he created his compelling dream-boxes. Robert Rauschenberg created his haunting and inexplicable Combines of the 1950s with the same kinds of detritus and trash.

Modern art, in other words, often is rubbish – or rather it invites us to see the beauty and magic of the discarded. Picasso and Braque started it all, when they invented collage. Today, collage is encouraged as an art activity for every child in Britain. Or does Daily Mail Reporter get home and toss aside his kid's proud creation of recycled stuff, declaring "so modern childhood IS rubbish"! Obviously, to compare what Batchelor has done with a child's work of art may not sound like a defence. "So modern art IS child's play!" But the reason kids are generally so much happier than their elders may have something to do with their ability to enjoy the world around them. Batchelor is simply inviting grownups to notice the wonder that children see. Art like his adds a bit of sanity and poetry to modern life. It is redemptive, joyous, liberating. Rubbish it at your peril.

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