

## Activity 1

Is it art?

### Who decides what art is?

Does an object become a work of art just because an artist says it is?

Look at the four things in the image below. Not everyone has agreed they are art.

(Top left, Flying Machine by Carsten Holler; top right, Self Portrait by Vincent Van Gogh; bottom left, some graffiti street art; bottom right, Fountain by Marcel Duchamp)

Read the text and complete the activity



Now you're going to read an article adapted from a video blog by the BBC's Arts Editor Will Gompertz. He recently visited an exhibition in London which displayed flying machines and slides. It made him ask himself: what is art

### Before you read

Look at these two summaries. Then read the article once, quite quickly, and decide which summary is correct.

1. Will Gompertz thinks that not everything in an art gallery is really art.
2. Will Gompertz thinks that if an object is in a gallery, it is art.



**urinal**

a type of toilet for men  
which is fixed to a wall

**appalled**

very shocked by something  
you don't agree with

**disgusting**

very unpleasant

**vulgar**

rude and upsetting

**automatically**

as part of the normal  
process

**interact**

move and communicate  
with

**playful**

not serious; funny

**installations**

types of modern art which  
often use sound, video and  
objects

**interact**

move and communicate  
with

**spiralling**

going downwards in a  
curve

**remote control**

machine which is  
controlled by a device  
which isn't attached to it

**goggles**

special glasses to protect  
the eyes

**functional**

working as it was designed  
to

**funfair**

entertainment area with  
rides and games

**profound**

with deep meaning

**amusing**

funny

**move**

(here) cause a strong  
emotion

**necessarily**

in every case

**Is it Art?****Part 1**

In 1917, a French artist called Marcel Duchamp bought a **urinal**, laid it on its back, signed and entered it for an art exhibition. The committee were **appalled**, they thought it was **disgusting** and **vulgar**, and certainly not a work of art.

But after Duchamp, the art world started to believe that anything an artist puts into a gallery **automatically** becomes a work of art. Can that be right?

**Part 2**

An exhibition of the German artist Carsten Holler's work has opened at London's Hayward Gallery. It is full of **playful installations**, which the visitor is invited to **interact** with. These include a **spiralling** slide, a flying machine, two **remote control** beds, and **goggles** that turn the world upside down.

**Part 3**

But are his flying machines and spiralling slides works of art? If they were in a theme park I'm not sure that we would think so. At least Duchamp changed the context for his urinal – he didn't install it in a bathroom in a local art gallery. He stopped it from having any **functional** purpose at all – he put it in a gallery, laid it on its back, and called it a sculpture.

He was asking us if art has to be beautiful and why it has to be made by an artist. The urinal sculpture became a way of delivering his message and so I think yes, it's an artwork.

**Part 4**

But I'm not so sure that I'd call Carsten Holler's interactive installations artwork. They are fairground-type rides that happen to be in an art gallery. Their purpose and function hasn't changed at all and I reacted to them as if I was at a **funfair**. Maybe I'm missing some **profound** point but I **just** found them **amusing** - a distraction. They didn't **move** me like a great Picasso painting or indeed many works by Duchamp.



## Part 5

I'm not saying that Carsten Holler isn't an artist but just that not everything he says is art is **necessarily** art. And I think that applies to many other artists and their installations in galleries. It's time, I think, to question what is and what isn't art.

This article was based on a [video blog](#) by the BBC's Arts Editor Will Gompertz.

**Choose the correct answer and write the letter into the space.**

1. **True or false:** In 1917, a French artist used a toilet as part of a display at an art exhibition.
2. **The committee at the the exhibition were...**  
A impressed with Duchamp's work.  
B not very happy about Duchamp's work.  
C very unhappy about Duchamp's work.
3. **According to the article, after Duchamp, the art world thought...**  
A by placing an object in a gallery, it becomes a work of art.  
B after a period of time, an object in a gallery may be considered as a work of art.
4. **Can visitors to the Hayward Gallery touch the art on display?**  
A Yes      B No
5. **Can you use Duchamp's urinal as a toilet?**  
A No you can't.  
B Yes you can.
6. **According to the article, art...**  
A has to be beautiful.  
B should ask questions and deliver messages.
7. **True or false: Will Gompertz thinks rides at a fairground are different to the rides in Holler's exhibition.**  
A True      B False
8. **Will Gompertz thought the Carten Holler exhibition was...**  
A funny and full of deep meaning.  
B funny.
9. **According to the article, the art world...**  
A is full of people who aren't really artists.  
B should discuss whether everything produced by artists is art.
10. **True or false: Will Gompertz thinks all of Carsten Holler's works can be called art.**  
A True      B False