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TRESPASS
by
Veronika Ivanova

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TRESPASS
AESTHETIC TRANSVALUATION
AND CONTEMPORARY TRANSGRESSIVE ART

VERONIKA IVANOVA

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Controversial artworks are relentlessly defended by art critics, who frequently downplay their disturbing emotional affect. Against an overwhelming consensus to the contrary, this essay will propose that ethical analysis is an effective and critically revealing method of engaging with contemporary transgressive art. It will argue that in favoring conceptual rather than emotional reactions, commentators fail to fully engage with the work they promote. Far from clouding our judgement, shame, outrage, and revulsion are the very emotions that artworks can set out to evoke. I am specifically interested in artists that challenge the attitude of aesthetic disinterestedness through engaging our moral sensibilities. Because ethical judgement of aesthetics is institutionally subordinate to formal aesthetic appreciation, such art can be identified as transgressive precisely because the reaction it sets out to provoke is a moral reaction. Surveying several transgressive artworks, this essay will defend the importance of visceral, emotional and ethical responses in aesthetic engagement with contemporary art.

AESTHETIC DISINTERESTEDNESS

“Beauty is a power we should reinvest with our own purpose.”

— Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 1994

Disinterestedness, long considered a fundamental traditional in art discourse, has its foundations in the philosophical tradition of the eighteenth century. As an aesthetic concept disinterestedness receives its most rigorous analysis in the work of Immanuel Kant, who argued in the *Critique of Judgment* that a form of contemplation disengaged from all practical contexts, and dissociated from all emotional or moral feelings, is the only objective form of perception appropriate to the rational appreciation of (artistic) beauty.

In order for a judgement of aesthetic value to have ‘universal’ validity, Kant decided that it must be “independent of all interest”¹. Disinterestedness has become generally understood in the philosophy of art as a specific modality of perception that, in disengaging our normal responses, imaginatively removing practical concerns and emotional reactions and, crucially, suppressing any moral responses, becomes sensitized to what makes an object qualify as art. This implies that the distinctively aesthetic value of the art object only discloses itself to a particular kind of perception that is not our normal attitude to ordinary objects.

¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Section 2.

Jerome Stolnitz presents the disinterested aesthetic viewpoint² as a suspension of our natural attitude to the world. This suspension resembles the mechanisms of reduction associated with philosophical phenomenology. Formulated by Edmund Husserl as an eidetic method, phenomenology, was capable of disclosing the essence of reality and furnishing presupposition-less grounding principles of knowledge. Such phenomenology was conditional on what Husserl called the “epoche”³, by which he meant the ‘bracketing’ or ‘putting out of action’ our natural orientation towards the everyday, it meant adopting a radically alternative attitude to the world such that reality appeared as it purely *is*, outside all moral, psychological, commonsensical, or socio-cultural schemas. The aesthetic attitude recommended by Stolnitz is a reduction in a phenomenological sense. To assume the disinterested attitude can be understood as an attempt to adopt a disengaged epoche that is capable of abstracting the art object from its relative and contingent, and especially moral, presuppositions. This suspension of our orientation to reality is repeatedly and consistently recommended by institutional aesthetics as the attitude most appropriate to the contemplation of art. It is this precise disinterested epoche that is contested by contemporary transgressive artists.

Kantian disinterestedness provides an ‘objective’ criterion for artistic value, enabling critics to distinguish aesthetic value from mere opinion. Yet it is precisely this concept that many contemporary artists actively investigate by engaging with

² Stolnitz, *On the Origins of Aesthetic Disinterestedness*, pp. 131–43.

³ Fink, Eugen. *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, p. 40.

the very emotional, sexual and moral worlds Kantian disinterestedness prescriptively disengages from.

In the philosophy of art there are two predominant ways in which the relationship between aesthetic value and moral value has been modeled. On the one hand, there are those convinced that the spheres of aesthetic value and moral value are absolutely distinct, necessarily separate and independent dimensions. This division of artistic and moral value is referred to as autonomism.

Defenders of aesthetic autonomy are committed to the identification of aesthetic value with artistic form, where aesthetic value will be found in “a works internal, formal, organic character, upon it’s inner systems of relations, upon its structure and its style, and not upon the morality it is presumed to recommend”.⁴ All the features associated with the doctrine of autonomy are summarized succinctly by Curtis Brown when he recommends that art objects:

“should be studied and appreciated as objects in their own right, without regard to the causes of their production, their historical context, their effects on an audience, or even their relation to the rest of the real world, and moreover, that the contemplation or study of artworks should appeal only to

⁴ Brown, *Art, Oppression, and the Autonomy of Aesthetics*, pp. 399–421.

some of the properties of the artwork, namely, it's aesthetic properties - as opposed especially to its moral properties..."⁵

Autonomism raises the antithesis of aesthetic value and moral value to a structural level by mapping its terms onto the dualism of form and content. Anything aesthetic in the art object will be identified with form, while everything else will remain associated with content.

However, the autonomist commitment to dualism contradicts recent tendencies in art practice, especially those that challenge precisely these divisions. The work of Catherine Opie, Marc Quinn, and Hans Haacke all come to mind. To discuss contemporary art without reference to its causes of production, its historical context, its audience affect or its relation to the real world, reveals a misunderstanding of its significance. If it can be shown that the moral value of at least some profound and compelling works of art are inseparable from their aesthetic value, then it becomes necessary to evaluate them from a contextual perspective as well as a formal one.

In recognition of the intertwinement of form and content, there is a branch in the philosophy of art committed to the view that moral value and aesthetic value are necessarily related. In a work of art that provokes moral indignation by describing reprehensible behavior (in the absence of their being marked with disapproval)

⁵ Brown, *Art, Oppression, and the Autonomy of Aesthetics*, pp. 399–421.

David Hume suggests in *Of the Standard of Taste*: “this must be allowed to disfigure the art, and to be a real aesthetic deformity.”⁶ Daniel Jacobson has labeled the offspring of views associated with this perspective Humean *moralism*, its central principle being: “moral defects in a work of art are aesthetic flaws; insofar as they are present, the work’s aesthetic value is diminished.” Humean moralism rejects the absolutist thesis that moral considerations are irrelevant to a work’s aesthetic value. Moralism argues that the morality of an artwork has a direct impact on its aesthetic value. However, this argument derives an absolutist thesis of its own: the morally defective work is inevitably aesthetically flawed.

A problem case for moralism is Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Written in a formally picturesque and richly allusive prose, *Lolita* is the diary of a predatory opportunist and unrepentant pedophile. Equally beautiful and disgusting, the novel was intended by Nabokov to reveal an artistic paradox. It is a work of aesthetic and moral trespasses, what is in effect child abuse is rendered as high poetry, confusing our habitual reaction to goodness and evil. Moralists find themselves in the position of having to condemn *Lolita* as an aesthetic failure.

Autonomism claims that an ethical problem in an aesthetic context is simply not a problem. Implicit in the recommendations of autonomism is the idea that art should predominantly concern itself with formal questions and ignore moral, social, or political commentary because these have an extraneous affect on aesthetic

⁶ Hume, *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, pp. 49–137.

value. In acknowledgement of this situation, there have been attempts to formulate more nuanced models adequate to the challenges posed to aesthetics by contemporary art. Neither autonomism nor moralism adequately accommodate the possible aesthetic and ethical dimensions and their unpredictable intersection in practice.

MYRA

In order to further illustrate all the ways form and content can intersect in art practice, we can look at the painting *Myra* by Marcus Harvey. A truly horrific work, *Myra*⁷ is jolting. This is in part because the painter manages to realize, to find affective formal means to substantiate and bear witness to the transgressions associated with Myra Hindley's crimes. *Myra* was made using casts of an infant's hand to build up a mosaic of black, grey and white handprints, creating a reproduction of the police photograph⁸ of Myra Hindley. The photograph is widely recognized in Britain, having been published incessantly in British newspapers in the decades after Hindley's conviction. Harvey has said, "The whole point of the painting is the photograph. That photograph. The iconic power that has come to it as a result of years of obsessive media reproduction."⁹ The painting juxtaposes, as Jennifer

⁷ Appendix, Figure 4

⁸ Appendix, Figure 3

⁹ Burn, *White Cube*.

Friedlander describes it, the tiny handprints of an innocent child and the "depraved world of adults"¹⁰, writ large on a gigantic canvas.

The Moors murders were carried out by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley between July 1963 and October 1965, in and around what is now Greater Manchester, England. The victims were five children aged between 10 and 17 — Pauline Reade, John Kilbride, Keith Bennett, Lesley Ann Downey and Edward Evans. The photographs and tape recording of the torture of Lesley Ann Downey, exhibited in court to a disbelieving audience, and the nonchalant responses of Brady and Hindley, helped to ensure the lasting notoriety of their crimes. Brady, who says that he does not want to be released, was rarely mentioned in the news, but Hindley's gender, her repeated insistence on her innocence, followed by her attempts to secure her release after confessing her guilt, resulted in her becoming a figure of hate in the national media. Her incessantly reprinted photograph¹¹, taken shortly after she was arrested, is described by some commentators as similar to the mythical Medusa and has become synonymous with the idea of feminine evil.

Defending the work on its debut public outage at the Saatchi gallery, Marcus Harvey claimed that his intentions were purely formal in nature; he simply wanted "to re-establish 'physical recollection' by informing the image of Hindley

¹⁰ Friedlander, *Feminine Look*, pp. 80–88.

¹¹ Appendix, Figure 4

with “a children’s innocence.”¹² Referring to the infamous photograph that constitutes the painting’s prototype. Harvey observed that the image is powerfully ambiguous: it possesses, he said, a “hideous attraction” that he hoped to “bring back to textural reality” by scaling it up with handprints.¹³ Making a mould of the little hand, he employed a plaster prosthetic to summon the ghostly traces of children to the surface of his work. Since the high-profile trial and their conviction, the case of Myra Hindley has been associated with extreme public emotion. It was no surprise that Harvey’s image became the source of a new wave of shock and outrage.

However, the work is not considered transgressive because it manipulates a familiar photograph until it begins to suggest the traumatic violations associated with a high profile murder, rather, the work counts as transgressive mainly because it remains unforthcoming about the issues surrounding Hindley and her crimes, issues that the work itself will provoke. *Myra* neither celebrates nor condemns, like other contemporary transgressive artworks, it merely presents and transfers the responsibility of deciding the meaning of the work (and how it is to be judged) onto the viewer. Harvey’s *Myra* is an extraordinarily mute work. It makes no statement and it solves no problem, it simply presents a difficult reality and leaves it there as a confrontation. The work stands at a distance from the response it elicits. This restraint is the most important feature of transgressive art, this structure of undecidability is an indication of the noncommittal attitude of

¹² Harvey, *Outrage at Children’s Portrait*.

¹³ Harvey, *Outrage at Children’s Portrait*.

transgressive artists, the work suggests no possibility that the artist is implicated in what she criticizes. Works like *Myra* are unique in the history of art in that they make an ethical claim on the viewer, the work demands that it be judged whether or not it was made in good faith. Such work uniquely pressurizes us into adopting a position, we have to decide whether the work empathizes with or victimizes those it involves, those on the receiving end of the crime, those who most acutely feel its after-effects. Is it a work of solidarity and sympathy, or is it a work of exposure and exploitation? We ask ourselves: Do subjects of artworks have rights as to how they are represented? Is the work supportive or discriminatory of the subjects it depicts or the people it affects?

Displaying a confidence untroubled by doubt about his ability to comment on such inflammatory, sensitive issues as infanticide, child abuse, and serial murder, as well as invoking questions of criminal punishment, recidivism, and the rehabilitation of prisoners, the statement manifested by *Myra* seems somehow conditional on its moral undecidability and its own abandonment of itself. As Jake Chapman wrote: "The attention given to the opticality of the surface fuses coldness and cruelty together such that the painting's chilling indifference makes an approximation of the crime."¹⁴ With reference to Berys Gaut's framework for the ethical analysis of art, is it possible to identify the attitude manifested by *Myra* as a moral indifference structural to the image? According to Gaut, the attitudes of art objects are manifested not in their structure but rather in the responses they pre-

¹⁴ Chapman, *Artshock*.

scribe to their audiences. Is it possible to discern a symmetry between the attitude that *Myra* manifests and the response it prescribes to its audience? Although Harvey's painting may be considered to manifest an exacerbated attitude of indifference, the one thing the viewer who engages with *Myra* cannot be is indifferent.

Why is it permissible to show the image of Myra Hindley on the front of a tabloid newspaper, but barely permissible for an artist to exhibit a painting of this this very same image? On the first day of the exhibition, Harvey's painting was vandalized in two separate incidents. First, Peter Fisher (an artist) smeared blue and red ink onto the painting before attempting to pull it down. He explained that he was taking a stand against the attitude expressed by a work that he believed to be "glorifying the crimes of a monster."¹⁵ Later, Jacques Rolé (another artist) managed to fire four eggs at the painting before being restrained by a passer-by.¹⁶ In mitigation of his conduct, Rolé explained: "There are moments when you must do something about it. Otherwise next time we will have even worse, we will have a picture of the actual torture."¹⁷ The painting was taken away for restoration, and despite protests against its replacement, the work was reinstalled three weeks later.

¹⁵ Thomas, *Paint Attack on Hindley's Picture*.

¹⁶ Harrison, *Ink and Eggs Hurlled at Myra Picture*.

¹⁷ Deeley, *I Should Have Wrecked it for Good*.

Critical responses to controversial works of art such as *Myra* have generally avoided ethical analysis, preferring instead to deflate any moral provocation by adopting a measured indifference against the suggestion that certain images may have a shocking impact. To such a liberal sensibility, developing the ethics of such an intimidating work might appear futile or even perverse. However, as the work provokes a moral reaction and therefore obliges the viewer to adopt a position in relation to the attitude it represents, ethical assessment is critical for understanding artworks, like *Myra*, that may be experienced as morally problematic.

In explicitly addressing the provocation of the work, an ethical assessment has the capacity to engage with morally transgressive art without seeking to neutralize its shock value and thereby critically overlook an aspect considered central to its meaning. In opposition to the deflationary tendencies of the standard art-critical approaches to transgressive art, an ethical evaluation of *Myra* accepts that Harvey's painting is a shocking image.

To define transgression we must think of a threshold, or rather, a movement towards the threshold, towards the limit. We must think of the self being pushed to its own limits, where it uncovers new limits, in an infinite procedure, that instead of liberating the self from its confines, imposes new limits that must be again transgressed.

THE CHAPMAN BROTHERS

Another art practice that exemplifies some of the shortcoming of both moralism and formalism is the work of Jake and Dinos Chapman, with its utilization of sexually explicit imagery. The Chapman brothers seem to take advantage of the immediacy of the visual as a means of establishing instant engagement. Their art is one of ruptures that challenge the homogeneity of the human body and, by extension, the idea of an ordered and enlightened world ruled by logic and reason. Deeply engaged in contemporary issues of morality, the Chapman brothers are intent on putting the viewer in a state of complete moral panic.

*Zygotic Acceleration*¹⁸ is a life-size model of sixteen anthropomorphic figures fused into a unified amalgamation. The result is a recognizably female gynoid with young bodies conjoined into a single naked, smooth, and featureless malformed organism. According to the artists, the model represents the “offspring of some biotechnological experiment.”¹⁹ What is controversial about the work is the manner in which the model has been sexualized. The figures have anatomically accurate and obviously adult genital organs grafted to the faces of the girls. Four have erect penises instead of noses and exaggerated cavities for mouths, and sculpted vaginal labias appear at the seams of where the faces of some of the

¹⁸ Appendix, Figure 1

¹⁹ Ramkalawon, *Jake and Dinos Chapman's Disasters of War*, p. 73.

girls have fused together. Jennifer Ramkalawon describes the unexpected way in which *Zygotic Acceleration* deceives its viewers by its partially non-threatening form: “At first the mannequins appear totally innocuous, standing innocently before the viewer” then suddenly “with a jolt one sees penises, anuses, and vaginas sprouting from some of the children’s heads. We are immediately put into the unlikely position of the covert pervert.”²⁰ Needless to say, this work attracted a substantial amount of condemnation.

Georges Bataille pointed at the sheer boundless capacity of human invention in the evasion of true self and the recognition of erotic urges in particular. Spectacle as a strategy becomes necessary if art is to produce a level of engagement that goes beyond mere amusement. It is a means of breaking down the barriers of civility and reason. Bataille suggests that “fear and horror are not the real and final reaction; on the contrary, they are a temptation to overstep the bounds.”²¹ Degradation, the violation of taboos, perversions and violence are all, for Bataille, mechanisms of transgression which facilitate the traversing of the threshold into the realm of the real.

The most intriguing artworks are generally described as those which manage the perfect coincidence of visual form with expressive intent. The Chapman brothers have defiled this ideal of straightforward symbolic representation and in-

²⁰Ramkalawon, *Jake and Dinos Chapman’s Disasters of War*, p. 67.

²¹ Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 144.

stead fold content into an unsettling visual form. It's the shifting balance between captivating form and complex iconographic content, resisting facile reading, that distinguishes their practice. Theirs is an art that proudly subscribes to an aesthetic of excess, not just in exposing the invisible and that from which we consciously avert our eyes, but also it's insistence on disintegration. What is really disturbing in Jake and Dinos Chapman's art are not the outward provocations of nudity, disease, and violence, but the underlying psychological meanings — the attack on the whole body, the blurring of gender, the revulsion of the abject, the insinuations of moral offenses. At the heart of their work is the creative conversion of psychological processes, symptoms and disorders into convincing material form, producing quite literal embodiments of the Freudian preconscious, noumenal "beyond"²². Penis envy, the fear of castration, Oedipal complexes, narcissism, hysteria, paranoia, sadism, and masochism, abjection, taboos and their violation, all make appearances and are given various sculptural and graphic form. Bataille's evocation of the 'pineal eye' is rendered in a number of works, such as *Seething Id*²³. The artists not only display an acute historical awareness of psychoanalysis, philosophy, and critical history, but continue a productive dialogue with past masters that extends from the apocalyptic visions of Goya via Rodin and the Surrealists to more recent proponents of psychological terror and trauma, such as Mike Kelley, with whom they share an interest in unfolding repressed traumas.

²² Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 8

²³ Appendix, Figure

“Abjection is above all ambiguity”²⁴, writes Julia Kristeva, and the state of confusion triggered by horror, disgust, and transgression suspends programmed inhibitions and conditioned responses to create a state of moral uncertainty. It is a crisis triggered by the artifice of art, one that attracts us through the sophistication of its workmanship and the opulence of its colors, and repulses us through its evocation of the real. The dynamics of attraction and repulsion are at the basis of social structures, sacred and civilizing forces establishing a system of taboos, rituals and values. Art has a mediating function and through horror, disgust, and laughter it can push those powerful unconscious processes which are at the heart of human existence to the surface, “in a sort of swirling turbulence where death and the most explosive tensions of life are simultaneously at play”²⁵.

In order to understand fully such morally transgressive art, according to Mary Devereaux, “we have to engage with its vision.”²⁶ Part of the provocation of the Chapman brothers’ work is precisely its ridicule of the ideology that with the identification ‘art’, everything is permitted. Valerie Reardon contests that the liberal identification of art and morality is based on the assumption that “all art is good art and that all art is good for us.”²⁷ She comments: “Enough has been written about the role art plays in reinforcing ideology to know that this is not true.”²⁸ So, al-

²⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 14.

²⁵ Bataille, *Attraction and Repulsion*, pp 123-124.

²⁶ Devereaux, *Beauty and Evil*, p. 246.

²⁷ Reardon, *Whose Image is it Anyway*, p. 45.

²⁸ Reardon, *Whose Image is it Anyway*, p. 45.

though they count as art: *Fuckface*²⁹, *Two-faced Cunt*, *Fuckface Twin*, as well as *Zygotic Acceleration*, can only be considered morally neutral by someone who does not understand, refuses to see, or deliberately distances themselves (through aesthetic disinterestedness and its positions) from what they are looking at.

The visceral Chapman aesthetic is not intended to be moral: “When our sculptures work they achieve the position of reducing the viewer to a state of absolute moral panic... they’re completely troublesome objects.”³⁰ Although their work has undeniable art status, that does not automatically entail, as Reardon indicates, that it is morally good. On the contrary, in this case, it is necessary to accept *Zygotic Acceleration* as an immoral work of art in order to grasp its meaning. By taking the morally problematic structure of the work seriously, ethical analysis avoids polarization into either of the unconstructive factions that have dominated discussion of transgressive works. Controversial artworks are typically defended, on the one side, by a discourse of non-moral endorsement, while on the other side, the reactionary rejection of controversial work largely based on the agitation by popular press sensationalism.

What sets Marcus Harvey and the Chapman brothers apart from more direct forms of art involving transgression, is how their application of non-overtly

²⁹ Appendix, Figure 2

³⁰ Chapman, *A Scatological Aesthetics*.

abject concepts affectively unsettle through personal taboo. In the past, artists such as the Viennese Actionists also showcased corporeal disfiguration, sexual deviancy, and illegal transgression in their art. However, the work of the Viennese Actionists is remembered for the transgressiveness of its willful destruction and violence. Among the most notorious works of transgressive art have been sculpture, collages, and installation art which specifically offended Christian religious sensibilities. These include Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, featuring a crucifix in a beaker of urine, and Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which was composed of elephant dung and close up cut-outs of women's genitalia.

In *Transgressions* Anthony Julius identifies the five most common defenses of transgressive art. There's the First Amendment defense, which says that art is entitled to constitutional protection; the aesthetic alibi, which makes art into a privileged zone in which the otherwise unsayable can be said; the formalist defense, which insists that it's naïve to talk about what art means, because the only proper subject of art is its own formal properties; the canonic defense, which maintains that many works of art refer to older and now canonical works, and so it's inconsistent to let them offend you, unless you want to take offense at the older works too; and the estrangement defense, which says that art instructs by jolting viewers out of their conventional responses.

All these defenses, Julius suggests, talk around, rather than about, the works in question. The formalist defense pretends that art doesn't mean anything

even when it obviously can. The canonic defense tries to quash discussion of one artwork by invoking the authority of another. The estrangement defense has a point, there is a pedagogic value to shocking people, but those who make the point often gloss over the way some artworks actually make you feel. They aren't intended merely to shock. They are meant to insult. Andres Serrano's photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine is clearly meant to offend at least some viewers. Setting aside the question of whether such aggression is justified, Julius asks, where did it come from, and how did it become so central to the definition of avant-garde art? How transgression became an indispensable attribute of cutting-edge art, Julius attributes that to Georges Bataille, who maintained that in a society dominated by concerns about productivity and order, true internal freedom can be achieved only by violating taboos.

AESTHETIC TRANSVALUATION

Is it possible to defend a work like *Myra* or *Zygotic Acceleration* in a way that vindicates their utterly ambiguous ethical status? Or are these practices worryingly marked by an ambivalence towards the moral issues that they provoke? (Does it become the responsibility of the artists to defend what appears to be a degrading and sexually victimizing violation?) In *Tragedy and Moral Value* Peter Lamarque reminds us that shock has a long-recognized capacity to develop and sustain themes of universal human concern. Part of the value of tragic art is in its

aesthetic ability to express what Lamarque calls a “metaphysical picture”³¹ which he argues possesses its own independent moral significance. Shocking art, by focusing on motifs with conventionally negative values such as moral failure and nihilistic cruelty, has the potential to elaborate (through sublimation in the tragic) on themes of universal ethical validity.

To demonstrate how the aesthetic transvaluation of morality is affected through shock, revulsion, and outrage, Lamarque proposes a distinction between the internal and external aspects of an artwork. To distinguish between the internal and external aspects of the work, Lamarque draws attention to the temporality of response: the emotional reaction to a work of art takes place at a level of immediate affective reaction, thus the internal aspect of a work is determined by reactions to the work as it is being experienced. We are reminded of Jacques Rolé’s reaction to *Myra*. This involuntary response is seen, in relation to transgressive art, as moral outrage, disgust, shame, guilt, pity, compassion, etc. In terms of the initial experience, internal aspects of the work would be experienced by complete absorption in, and simultaneously in visceral repulsion from, the transgressive work in question. Yet this immediate visceral internal aspect is complemented by the external aspect of the work — which is a later consequential, post-response to the work that follows, and is dependent on the earlier initial reaction.

³¹ Lamarque, *Tragedy and Moral Value*, p. 275.

Lamarque suggests that we come to appreciate, in hindsight, the same work that provoked an initial visceral reaction of disgust and contempt. The work appears as expressive of a 'meta-ethical' narrative that transcends (and Lamarque suggests ultimately justifies) the specific immoralities responsible for the immediate reaction of repulsion and shock. The major aspect of the work is revealed in hindsight, by gradual release, and it comes to light through Lamarque's "external aspect"³² that cancels and transcends the immediate immorality associated with the work. This results in a reevaluation of the immorality of the work, for Lamarque the principle characteristic of the external aspect is precisely the questioning of the emotional response associated with the initial immediate reaction.

The moral value of offensive art consists in immediate moral indignation to the offense undraped before us, providing an aesthetically controlled, mediated 'imaginative access' to deeply disturbing themes of suffering, violence, meaningless death, absurd cruelty, horror, and abjection. Aristotelian catharsis, Lamarque concludes, is not merely the pleasurable release of vicarious experience, but rather a form of self-knowledge, one involving a clarification or working through of the emotions, revealing their proper ethical objects. It does not matter therefore if it can be rationally established that the work is in fact unethical: what matters in this context is the experience of considering the situation that the work invariably refers to as tragically immoral. Tragedy elicits a sympathetic response to immediate scenes, and yet moral themes are paradoxically rendered more abrupt, ur-

³² Lamarque, *Tragedy and Moral Value*, p. 280.

gent and intensely felt through evaluation of our emotive reactions to the transgressive work posterior to the immediate reaction to it. Following the experience of moral shock, given time in which to develop a reflective response to this initial shock, the ethical aftershock arrives.

Sympathy sensitizes us to the emotional life of others. Feeling as another feels is a form of trans-subjective ethical substitution: self for other. This process is considered fundamental to the ethical experience. Transgressive art constructs a setting in which we can experience tragedy vicariously. Moral conduct requires that we see the world as others see it, and this requires that we must not strive for emotional distance, but emotional connectedness. Tragic sympathy sensitizes us to the suffering of others. Transgression becomes a valued cultural practice because the uncompromisingly honest confrontation with the less pleasant aspects of the human condition is assumed to be a healthy social regulative. The burden has fallen on contemporary culture to put in place the creative conditions that make it possible to experience abandonment and excess safely and to give (at least vicarious) expression to the impulsive attraction, to the instinctual urge, towards the amoral and the irrational. Thanks to transgressive art practices, we can experience excess, and identify with possibilities of life liberated from all social constraints and moral judgement, at an acceptable imaginative distance.

APPENDIX



Figure 1
JAKE & DINOS CHAPMAN
Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, De-Sublimated Libidinal Model
1995
Fibreglass, resin, paint, fabric, wig and trainers
150 x 180 x 140 cm



Figure 2
JAKE & DINOS CHAPMAN
Fuck Face
1994
Fibreglass, resin, paint, fabric, wig and trainers
103 x 56 x 25cm



Figure 3
JAKE & DINOS CHAPMAN
Seething Id
1994
Fibreglass, resin and paint on astroturf

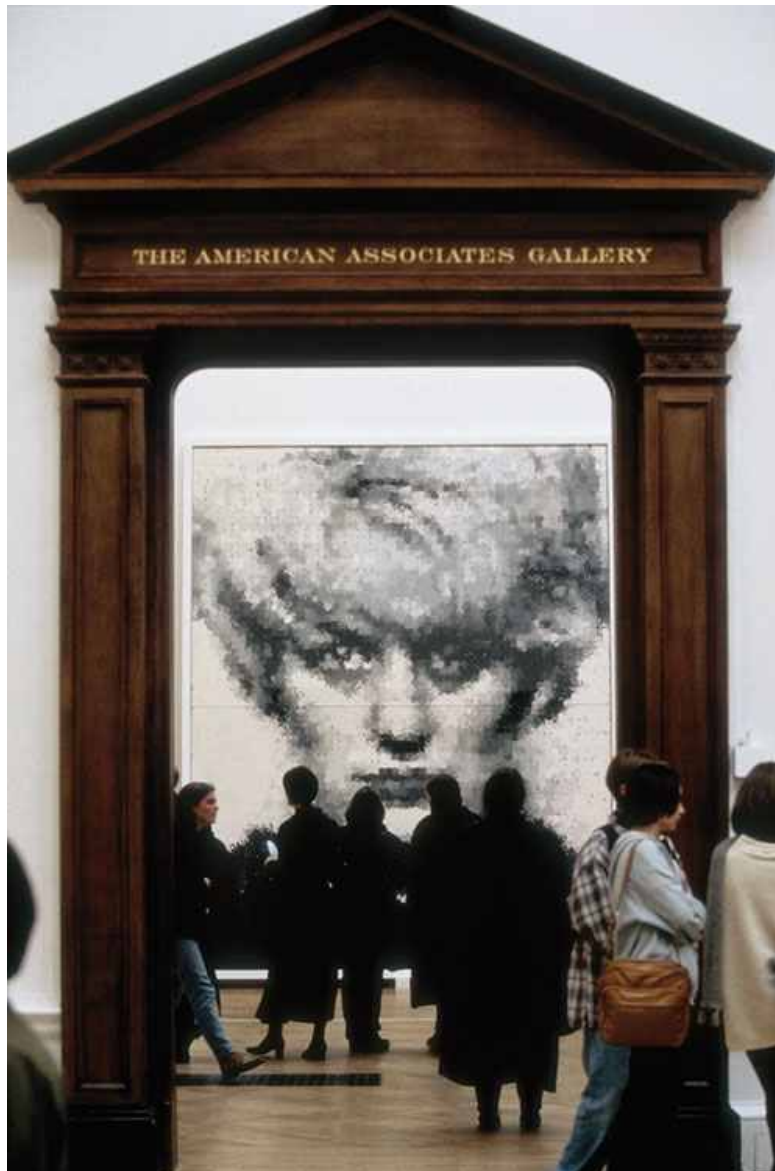


Figure 4
Myra Hindley
Police Custody



Figure 5
MARCUS HARVEY
Myra
1995
acrylic and canvas
396.2 x 320 cm





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