

Appropriate Appropriation:
An Ethical Assessment of Cultural Appropriation in Fine Art

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Cultural appropriation is a concept that seems to carry with it a negative connotation. I think this is understandable since the practice often involves the recognition of certain societal divides, which can be highly sensitive and political. This can make people uncomfortable, and in the context of the arts, it has been known to cause offense. This sensitivity has been used as a superficial counter against cultural appropriation, especially by those who feel their culture is the one being appropriated from.

It is an easy argument to apply against artists who appropriate. It makes for a simple stance when an offended party stages a public outcry, helping them to gain traction and visibility in the landscape containing the politics of culture. The case for cultural appropriation in fine art, or at least the one against the censorship of it, takes more effort and time to present because it does not crux on the emotions of those attempting to make an ethical judgment call.

It appears that the offense argument has been so convincing as the main reason not to engage in cultural appropriation because it simply *feels* as though it's right. If we were to place ourselves in the offended party's shoes, we might say, "Well, it's possible we wouldn't appreciate that sort of act either." However, if someone wants to make an ethical case against cultural appropriation, the mere fact that it could cause some offense some of the time is simply not enough to label it unethical.

This is not to say that there are no legitimate concerns regarding cultural appropriation; it is just going to be a slightly murky swamp to tread through in order to determine if the practice is always unethical, always ethical, or sometimes unethical. After my investigation, I find myself of the mind that artists do not act wrongly or unethically when they engage in honest cultural appropriation. I will be using much of the theory of James O. Young, who heads the Department of Philosophy at the University of Victoria and has written/edited for the essay collections *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, and *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*. He has

aggregated a wide range of evidence to tackle the difficulties that arise when individuals, businesses, the media, academic institutions, etc. appropriate both the tangible and intangible. Again, I will be focusing on the practice of fine artists (which would exclude the collecting of artifacts à la museums/Indiana Jones types).

First, I believe it would be pertinent to try and make clear the definitions and implications I use for a couple of key terms and ideas used in defending my position. The term “culture” is defined by the *American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* as: “The sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguishes one group of people from another. Culture is transmitted, through language, material objects, ritual, institutions, and art, from one generation to the next.” Young adds that “a group of people who share a set of traits not only share a culture. They also are a culture...individuals who share some culture participate in that culture.”¹ He notes that various researchers and writers have disputed the use of such a concept because of the “elitist and imperialist” way that achievements of groups are held to Western standards in order to be deemed cultural.

This conviction is echoed by Don Mitchell, Distinguished Professor of Geography at Syracuse University and previous MacArthur and Guggenheim fellow. In his essay “There’s No Such Thing as Culture,” he argues that “there is no such (ontological) thing as culture. Rather, there is only a very powerful *idea* of culture, an idea that has developed under specific historical conditions and was later broadened as a means of explaining material differences, social order and relations of power.”² He goes on to conclude that “like ‘race’, ‘culture’ is a social imposition on an unruly world.”³ At first pass, I would almost agree, especially with the added assertion by Kwame Anthony Appiah, noted writer and Professor of Philosophy at Princeton, that the concept

¹ Paul O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2010), 10.

² Don Mitchell, “There’s No Such Thing As Culture: Towards a Reconceptualization of the Idea of Culture in Geography.” *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 20, no. 1 (1995): 103.

³ *Ibid*, 112

of culture perhaps has no application since the overlap of cultures makes them difficult to define; perhaps if there is no obvious delineation, it is not something we can truly reference in discussion. He remarks, too, that in some areas where the concept was introduced (sometimes by the political “creation” of a group), having not been conceptualized by the locals previously, the increase in self-determination and allegiance to a particular “culture” has led to an increase in tension and violence.⁴

If we hold that the notion of culture is this problematic and undefinable, maybe a discussion of cultural appropriation is futile and an argument against it ultimately non-existent. But I do not believe this is so. I don’t find it a legitimate refutation to simply deny an offended party’s concerns with the rationale that culture is undefinable, therefore cultural appropriation cannot occur and so there is no case and no reason to voice opposition to an artwork.

Turning back to Young to support my contestation, he states, “Western anthropologists...may have developed the concept of culture [but] members of certain groups of people are more likely to have certain beliefs, attitudes, and customs than are members of other groups [even] long before any anthropologist started to think about the distinction.”⁵ In some instances, it could be difficult, because of the aforementioned cultural fusion, to determine precisely if an artist is appropriating at all, but this should not impede the construction of a definition of culture; it will just be more fluid.

Young applies philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s family resemblance concept to help solidify a definition that will enable discussion and debate about appropriation. He states:

...we can conceive of games. We do so because we can grasp that something is a game when it possesses enough of some range of properties, none of them either necessary or sufficient for gamehood. No game possesses all the properties associated with games. Something is a game if it possesses a sufficient number of a certain range of properties...A culture

⁴ Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, 11.

⁵ Ibid.

is simply a collection of people who share a certain range of cultural traits. Perhaps no member of the culture has all of the traits associated with the culture.⁶

It will be valuable to have a way to distinguish between who is an insider and who is an outsider of a particular culture since often that very distinction will be relevant or meaningful to the artwork itself. Those people who share a range of traits including attitudes, customs, and beliefs will constitute the insiders or the culture from which some artists appropriate.

I would also like to make clear what I imply when I state in my thesis that artists do not act wrongly when they engage in “honest” cultural appropriation. There are all sorts of examples that point to how cultural appropriation is potentially harmful when someone who claims to be an insider is not and they proceed to make and display or sell artwork with the intention that viewers won’t discover the artist is not, in fact, an insider (there have been quite a few reports of this occurring with Australian aboriginal art). I don’t actually see this as a form of cultural appropriation, at least not an “honest” one; this is fraud. Fraud, which preys on trust at the significant expense of the trusting, is what is unethical here and not the act of appropriation. Now, the immediate aesthetic qualities of said outsider’s artwork may be indistinguishable from an insider’s, however, contemporary thought deems the context, and not simply the formal qualities, of an artwork to be of importance. It is one reason why we would be justifiably angered to find out a perfect rendition of a Picasso we purchased was a forgery. So we could question the merit and honesty of an artwork created in this context.

I am not concerned in this argument with instances such as these. I’m not interested in grouping something made with fraudulent intent in a defense along with those which were made in good faith. These are two separate practices (because an artist would have to be of a completely different mindset, and, arguably, in the end a fraudulent artist is not really an artist

⁶ Ibid, 15.

anyway), and the existence of dishonest and fraudulent appropriation should not then render honest cultural appropriation unethical.

Though “honest” cultural appropriation would hopefully have a more positive connotation, “appropriation” itself seems to imply, or has been used to imply, a negative taking, or a kind of theft. Clearly, in my argument, I disagree. But I do think “appropriation” could use some additional clarification. Young has quite conveniently constructed a list separating specific types based on activities previously deemed to be acts of cultural appropriation, which can be helpful since, potentially, some kinds could be ethical and others might not. By making a distinction, it may serve the purpose of helping us to better understand what exactly may be unethical, and why it may be so. Hopefully then we can better defend what should be defended and acknowledge which indefensible acts should be discontinued.

Young, too, points out that “appropriation” involves taking to some degree, but not every classification of cultural appropriation will ultimately result in the kind of act of taking that is used to frame cultural appropriation as ethically suspect. A quite obvious act of taking, though, is what Young labels *object appropriation*. Since this requires a tangible article, we are not currently concerned with this category.⁷ What we do have concern for is *content appropriation* and its two subcategories *style* and *motif appropriation*. These cover the full and partial reuse of articulated ideas from another culture, but also the “inspiration” derived from outside the artist’s culture as well, though the outsider’s work might not be in the recognizable style attributable to the insider’s culture. This could be something like Van Gogh’s *The Sower* (Fig. 01) which is

⁷ One may want to argue that perhaps we should be concerned since an artist may use an actual object taken from another culture in their artwork. First, there is a difference between something an artist has “taken” and something the artist owns and wants to use. Either way, ownership is one question we are wrangling with, and we do know that objects are definite things that *can* be owned. What makes cultural appropriation so complicated in fine art is the question of whether something like a particular style can actually be owned, and, if not, then the use of it can’t necessarily be claimed as theft and posited as unethical for that reason. Many arguments against cultural appropriation hinge on this idea, but they end up very shaky since ownership is so questionable. I also think that most individuals would have no problem with an outsider artist having in their possession an artifact created by an insider if the object had been (legally) bought and paid for. It is the subsequent use as a *visual representation*, as a supposed claim to ownership of the *image* presented, that then creates a perceived ethical problem.

highly influenced by Japanese prints, but is painted with his own signature energetic style, and is not a direct reference to a specific work.

The last type of appropriation differs in that it deals with the depiction of cultural subjects, which is why it is labeled *subject appropriation*. It is hard to characterize this as an act of taking in the way that content appropriation uses a visual product created by another culture. As explained by Young, “When artists represent their experience of other cultures, the insiders are left with their experiences. They are not appropriated. Other cultures fall within the experience of artists so, in representing other cultures, artists do not have to appropriate anyone’s experience, even if that were possible.”⁸ This perhaps seems more obvious in a practice like painting, where there is much more evidence and awareness of the artist, who is then filtering his or her personal experience and understanding. But even in photography, such as Andreas Gursky’s *Kuwait Stock Exchange* (Fig. 02), we must realize that the photographer is the curator of information; it is only the view of the artist that is able to be conveyed. In the case of Gursky, he is present in the room, behind the lens; it is his choice of capturing a mass of white-clad figures (not one or two, from above not below or among, etc.) that speaks to his experience of the event, no one else’s. Even so, the insider-outsider relationship is still present and many of the same types of questions and uncertainties arise from both subject and content appropriation.

One line of that kind of questioning may go as follows. If an artist admits to being an outsider, does this knowledge make the “authenticity” of his or her artwork problematic? Would this consequently make the quality of the artwork decrease? Can we logically conclude that inauthentic art and low-quality art resulting necessarily from cultural appropriation means cultural appropriation is unethical? When presented in the form of these questions, perhaps the answer seems obvious. How can the quality of an artwork dictate its ethical value? But the

⁸ Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, 8.

mentality of authenticity has been tangled in the emotions of those suspicious of cultural appropriation. Often, the sentiment follows a path of thought that assumes an outsider will not (and cannot) understand the images and subjects they are using, which means they won't be used correctly. Only when used correctly will the images result in a successful work of art. Therefore, the reasoning is, an outsider *ought* not to make art with culturally appropriated imagery; it becomes a way to justify the ethical conclusion that cultural appropriation is wrong.

If we think about simply the formal qualities of an artwork, it is safe to say that it is impossible to know, just by looking at a piece of artwork, whether it was created by an insider or an outsider. Being an insider does not automatically make someone proficient at successfully employing their culture's visual content, as it is an acquired skill. Conversely, being an outsider doesn't automatically prevent someone from developing proficiency, as they could learn the same skill. This is not solely in theory either; it is the reason why forgeries are of real and undisputed concern. But perhaps the interpretation and subsequent judgment of artistic quality will be affected by knowledge of the presence of an outsider's hand, or in other words, by the context in which it was created. In this case, the success of the artwork is affected by its "authenticity," or lack thereof. The above reasoning suggests that an authentic expression using culturally appropriated imagery is not possible, which would negatively impact any attempt at trying to do so. This is really an argument about what actually constitutes "authenticity." Should we find that cultural appropriation doesn't always make for an inauthentic result, then this argument doesn't hold in that regard. But more importantly, this argument can't prove that bad or flawed art resulting from inauthenticity is unethical.

In fact, it seems rather an easy point to dispute. Artwork resulting from cultural appropriation can certainly be authentic. Young identifies four kinds of authenticity: *personal*, *existential*, *style* and *experience*. Perhaps not all will be present in every artwork, but part of the

process of evaluating the merit of artworks is to identify the categories to which they belong. We would not fault a painting for *not* being photography, so we cannot fault an artwork that makes original, creative reuse of culturally appropriated images for being personally authentic and not experience authentic, if that is the honest intent of the artist. Experience authenticity appears to be of perhaps greater importance to insiders: if you have not experienced life as a member of our culture, then you cannot represent our culture. It will be important, for honest cultural appropriation, for outsider artists not to present themselves as having experience authenticity, but it does not follow that their artwork will suffer flaws because of it. On the contrary, in some instances it could be a benefit. As put by Young, “The perspective of an outsider on a culture can be an advantage when it comes to producing works of art that provide insight into the culture. The best biography is not always autobiography. Frequently, we can learn something about ourselves from seeing how others see us.”⁹ Possibly one of my favorite examples of this might be *Pentagon* (Fig. 03), by Huang Yong Ping, a prominent Chinese artist whose body of work deals with the history of “East” and “West” relations. In this work, seed beds have been planted in a ceramic maquette of the Pentagon.¹⁰ Worn, and with the suggestion of an impending overgrowth, we can see an outsider’s perspective on the supposed longevity of this military institution – and, perhaps by extension its dominance – that many in the U.S. probably take for granted. Some may not like the viewpoint, but it is an authentic one, regardless. Ultimately, the authenticity argument does not successfully show that artists will necessarily create flawed works when they culturally appropriate, and, therefore, also does not prove that the practice is unethical for that reason.

⁹ Ibid, 61.

¹⁰Rodrigo Moura, “Huang Yong Ping,” in *Art Now: Vol 3*, ed. Hans Werner Holzwarth (Berlin: Taschen, 2008), 260.

It seems to me that what the purveyors of the authenticity argument are really concerned about is not actually the authenticity of art and the merits it brings to the work, but the risk that inauthenticity breeds misrepresentation. This is not a necessary result of inauthenticity, nor is inauthenticity a necessary result of cultural appropriation. But misrepresentation is a real problem if it is harmful. Young identifies three types of harm that could potentially be legitimate challenges to the practice of cultural appropriation: assault, theft, and profound offense.

Misrepresentation could fall under the category of assault, or the category of profound offense should the misrepresentation be legitimately harmful. But as Young points out, it would not necessarily be because of cultural appropriation, or the fact that the artist was an outsider, that the misrepresentation occurred; it would be just as possible and just as wrong for an insider to do the same.¹¹ As well, though examples could be cited of instances where outsiders have misrepresented insiders' culture, this does not mean *all* instances of cultural appropriation will result in misrepresentation.¹² Take the work of Darren Almond. Manipulated photographs like *Infinite Betweens: Life Between, Phase 3* (Fig. 04) could perhaps be criticized as a distortion, possibly resulting in harmful misrepresentation. But we can see clearly this is not the case. If anything, this particular work, by superimposing the images of buddhist prayer cloths onto each other in infinite depths, instead seems to reinforce and even heighten the cultural symbolism they carry as images. Part of the function of these cloths is in hanging, often layered decoratively, outside and left to weather. A photograph seems to contradict this purpose, but capturing and collaging various moments of the life cycle of these cloths doesn't misrepresent their original intent. I rather think it serves to explain the custom in an alternative and fresh way. This is just one example that could serve to show that not all cultural appropriation must result in distortion or misrepresentation.

¹¹ Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, 108.

¹² *Ibid*, 109.

Another thoughtful point that Young makes still centers on misrepresentation, but it is the misrepresentation of “reality,” not of insiders’ culture that he is concerned with. He says, “Insiders can be harmed by omission as much as by inclusion. Arguably, in some contexts, outsiders are obliged to represent other cultures.”¹³ If an artist depicts or represents certain places or times, but refrains from including evidence of cultures different than their own that truly exist within that context, that itself could indicate a possible rejection of those cultures by the artist. To ignore a culture, even deny it, could certainly perpetuate the untruth that the culture doesn’t, perhaps shouldn’t, exist and could even decrease the insiders’ feelings of self-worth, which are harms that actually *support* the act of cultural appropriation in fine art.

But what my thesis is claiming is that it is not unethical for artists to culturally appropriate, and I have already stated that examples could be found resulting in misrepresentation. So is there a defense for those works? Based on Young’s thought, I believe so. He states, “Being ethically unobjectionable is not a necessary condition for a work’s being aesthetically valuable. Ethical flaws can be more than counterbalanced by other factors.”¹⁴ One tradition that comes to mind is Orientalism in Western art. The name of that concept has evolved to become a pejorative, stemming from the way that era of art and design distorted Middle Eastern and Central Asian cultures and perpetuated stereotypes of them. However, the historical significance of such works overrides our ethical objections to viewing them. Indeed, we hold these works in high enough regard as to continue teaching and learning about them. Actually, I believe this is a better method of ensuring such distortion does not persist into contemporary practice, rather than outright dismissing such works as “unethical” and essentially censoring them.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 108.

The prevention of censorship is another reason we should hesitate to deem works resulting from cultural appropriation as too unethical to be allowed, even if they are misrepresentative in some way. (In fact, it could be argued that incompetent or distortive works by insider artists are actually of greater objection seeing as they are more likely viewed as authorities and their works a true representation of the culture. This does not altogether dismiss protests to outside usage of content and subjects, however.) As stated by Young, “The production of an artwork is an act of self-realization and vital self-expression... We should always be reluctant to say that a person acts wrongly who is engaged in an act of self-realization.”¹⁵ Again, comparing the significance of one act to another, it seems a greater imperative to have freedom of expression than safety from misrepresentation.

I would say this is also partly due to the fact that misrepresentation stemming from cultural appropriation has historically generated counter-movements or counter-works that address the problem both directly and indirectly. Kehinde Wiley is one painter who sees an opportunity in directly countering the visual traditions that have perpetuated the gender and race myth of the white man’s rightful dominance (Fig. 05).¹⁶ Instead of seeking to ignore that tradition as a means to quiet it, he uses it to engage a dialogue about that convention itself; his view as a black artist has been dependent on a culture he stands outside of. Fine art is a cyclical conversation, and if individuals want the voices of their cultures heard or understood, they should actively present their views rather than quell the voices of others, which impedes thought-provoking conversation and transforms it to a series of controlled, rehashed, and clichéd statements; essentially, it becomes a dull exchange about the weather. Neither side benefits from this, but we all benefit from the great number of works that have been allowed to flourish, both

¹⁵ Ibid, 113.

¹⁶ Cecilia Alemani, “Kehinde Wiley.” in *Art Now: Vol 3*, ed. Hans Werner Holzwarth (Berlin: Taschen, 2008), 513.

those that are offensive as well as inoffensive. In short, cultural appropriation can be defended even if it results in misrepresentation because of the importance of self-expression and self-realization that spawns works of historical significance, whether they stereotype or counter the stereotypes, which would not have been created without the practice.

The logic of the misrepresentation argument is similar to the logic that induces many other arguments against cultural appropriation. They can then be similarly disputed. Other objections include the use of insignia or the use of private subjects or content. Some private information may be obtained surreptitiously, deceptively or coercively, but this, then, is not “honest” cultural appropriation, and it would be unethical to utilize. When information is obtained through “free communication of authorized insiders,”¹⁷ then it is not, even if it may cause trepidation to some insiders. Likewise, when insignia, which perform institutional functions such as indicating certain roles or authority, are used to deceive, this is not honest appropriation. But, when used in art, they take on added meaning due to their new context as an artistic element, and so their initial usage is changed to a point where it doesn’t function the same way, yet doesn’t impede the usage in other contexts. It is similar to copyrighted logos that show ownership of a product, but when used in fine art, they are seen as representations; viewers are not mistaken that the artwork then *belongs* to the company or corporation whose logo is being utilized. Insiders may be uncomfortable that it is displayed, but all these above reasons explain why it is not unethical.

What is also notable is that these arguments against cultural appropriation are frequently vocalized the loudest by minority and indigenous cultures. They often feel that so much has been taken away from them already, that cultural appropriation by artists is effectually stealing and is an added practice of dominance over what is rightfully theirs. In order for theft to be a legitimate

¹⁷ Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, 126.

objection, however, a culture must first show ownership of the content or subjects being appropriated, and from an ethical standpoint, not a legal one. There are also concerns over basically what amounts to theft of economic opportunity as well. When it comes to fine art, though, there is essentially no valid claim of theft due to honest cultural appropriation (again, forgeries and plagiarism are deceptive practices that do not apply here). The logic of the economic opportunity argument centers on the concern that there is a deprivation of audience for works by insiders when subjects or content are used by outsiders, thus the economic gains that result from a culture's creation of artwork is stymied. However, as put by Young, "it is not clear that any public audience rightfully belongs to anyone...No painters have a right to have their paintings bought or displayed...A public audience is something that an artist earns by producing works that deserve attention."¹⁸ Even if it was perhaps true that cultural appropriation by artists shifted the audience to works by outsiders rather than insiders, that audience was never owned by the insiders in the first place, and so the outsiders have not committed a theft.

Additionally, it does not actually tend to happen that the audience for a particular type of artwork abandons the creations of insiders for those of outsiders; the market is not fixed, so it is more than possible for an audience to have an appreciation for *both*. In fact, many are in agreement that the attraction or appeal in artwork resulting from cultural appropriation can, and very often is, an effective way to increase the popularity or interest in the insider's culture, or at least the content and subjects that have been borrowed, expanding the market for all.¹⁹

"Borrowed," however, is not often the word of choice for opponents of cultural appropriation; content and subjects are thought to be "stolen." Again, do cultures have a right to ownership of styles, themes, motifs, or subjects? I don't believe they do. Young makes the point

¹⁸ Ibid, 117.

¹⁹ Thomas Heyd, "Rock Art Aesthetics and Cultural Appropriation." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61, no. 1 (2003): 38.

that, “although works of art grow out of a tradition, the aesthetic value of virtually any work of art is the product of some individual’s genius.”²⁰ Other members of the culture cannot claim ownership of the visual creations of an artist whether they are part of the same culture or not. Also, styles, themes, motifs, and subjects do not constitute the full expression of an idea the way an actual painting, sculpture, etc. would. It is not possible to place restrictions on artists from using this or that combination of lines and shapes or from depicting such and such way of life.²¹ “An individual or group is only entitled to concrete items of cultural property.”²² If a copyrighted item of intellectual property is used without permission, that could very well be a possible instance of theft, but from an individual, not a culture. Ultimately, there seems to be no way to justify cultural appropriation as theft from a whole culture.

I have now given several reasons why artists who use cultural appropriation as part of their practice do not act unethically; they do not engage in theft, they do not cause harm to the functioning of cultures or their economic opportunities, and the importance of free expression trumps viewers’ freedom from feeling offended. I would like to point out, too, that this includes close to every artist that is, has been, and ever will be; it is impossible *not* to appropriate as an artist. “Art” is also partly the interpretation of art, so even if some artists don’t believe they have engaged in the act of cultural appropriation while creating their work, the end product certainly builds on all that has come before it, which ultimately results in the viewer drawing from global contexts. In essence, if cultural appropriation is an unethical act by the artist, then any audience outside of the artist’s would be acting unethically too, by viewing the artist’s work. The unethical cultural appropriation logic suggests that if an outsider will misuse or misrepresent, then they

²⁰ Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, 80.

²¹ Ibid, 81. Indigenous groups often believe they are protecting themselves by perpetuating the theft argument, however, it is very possible to backfire should *they* utilize a style, theme, motif, or subject that is claimed by a more powerful (usually economically) nation or corporation that seeks ownership and compensation for usage.

²² Ibid.

will also misinterpret. And we have the entire history and tradition of art from all of humanity all over the world to prove this is false. Young makes a great statement in saying, “humans, for all of their cultural and other differences, are not so different that they are incapable of understanding each other.” And isn’t this partly the purpose of art? To engage in inquiry for an increase in understanding? We should not just simply allow the practice of cultural appropriation, as artists, we should actively be recognizing and encouraging it.

This seems to be echoed by the greater anthropological community. In speaking with Timothy Bober, my professor of anthropology at Kendall, I have come to the conclusion that most of the discomfort that audiences or insiders feel partly stems from a misunderstanding of how their own cultures, elements of their culture, or just cultures in general grew and developed. “Borrowing,” as Bober puts it, has always existed and is inevitable. There is not much of a debate among anthropologists about whether cultures are contained by impenetrable boundaries now or historically. Exchange between cultures is a regular occurrence that may have positive or negative results in some instances, but the act itself is neither, really; it simply is.

He also brought up the point that if cultural relativism is used as a defense against cultural appropriation – a kind of “let us be” argument where certain images are regulated by the insiders’ own laws, sometimes prejudicially by outsiders’ views, e.g. prohibiting Australian Aboriginal women from learning to create exclusive symbols and pictograms – then it could reciprocally be used as a justification to allow the practice, since the borrowing artist would be acting in accordance with her own culture’s accepted behaviors. It’s a little bit “tit-for-tat,” but, unfortunately in the eyes of some cultures, it shows again how weak or even non-existent the justifications for putting barriers in place really are. I don’t think any genuine artist would desire to spite those attempts just because they have the capacity to, or to see their artwork cause pain, or harm, or offense, but if that does happen, it is not necessarily their responsibility to alleviate it.

That may sound harsh to some ears, but I think Simon Blackburn put it well when he states in *Being Good*, "...we have to be realistic, and we should not demand too much from ourselves and each other."²³ We cannot be expected to live our lives in confinement, in fear of stepping outside the cultural lines that others define us by; individuals will cease feeling compelled to be ethical if it is unrealistic. Likewise, insiders should not rebuke or hinder an honest artist's attempts at expression every time an offense is felt. Young, I think, would agree. He states, "One can reasonably expect that others will react reasonably to one's actions. If they do not, that is not the actor's fault."²⁴ No art that is made is done so without cultural appropriation to some degree, if simply for the fact that art builds on the history of itself. Cultures are contingent on time and the acquisition of knowledge; a "Greek" now is not a "Greek" then. It is not the fault of the artist that the viewer may not recognize this. Ultimately, my argument does seem to end up as an all-or-nothing: without cultural appropriation, there would be no art at all.

²³ Simon Blackburn, *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 47

²⁴ Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, 148.



Fig. 01
Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower*. 1888.
Oil on Canvas, 32 x 40 cm. The Van
Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. From: The
Van Gogh Museum



Fig. 02
Andreas Gursky, *Kuwait Stock Exchange*.
2007, C-print, 295.1 x 222 x 6.2 cm. From: *Art
Now*, Berlin: Taschen, 2008. Page 207.



Fig. 03
Huang Yong Ping, *Pentagon*. 2007, ceramic, soil, plants, 50 x 550 x 550 cm. Gladstone Gallery, New York. From: Art Now, Berlin: Taschen, 2008. Page 262.

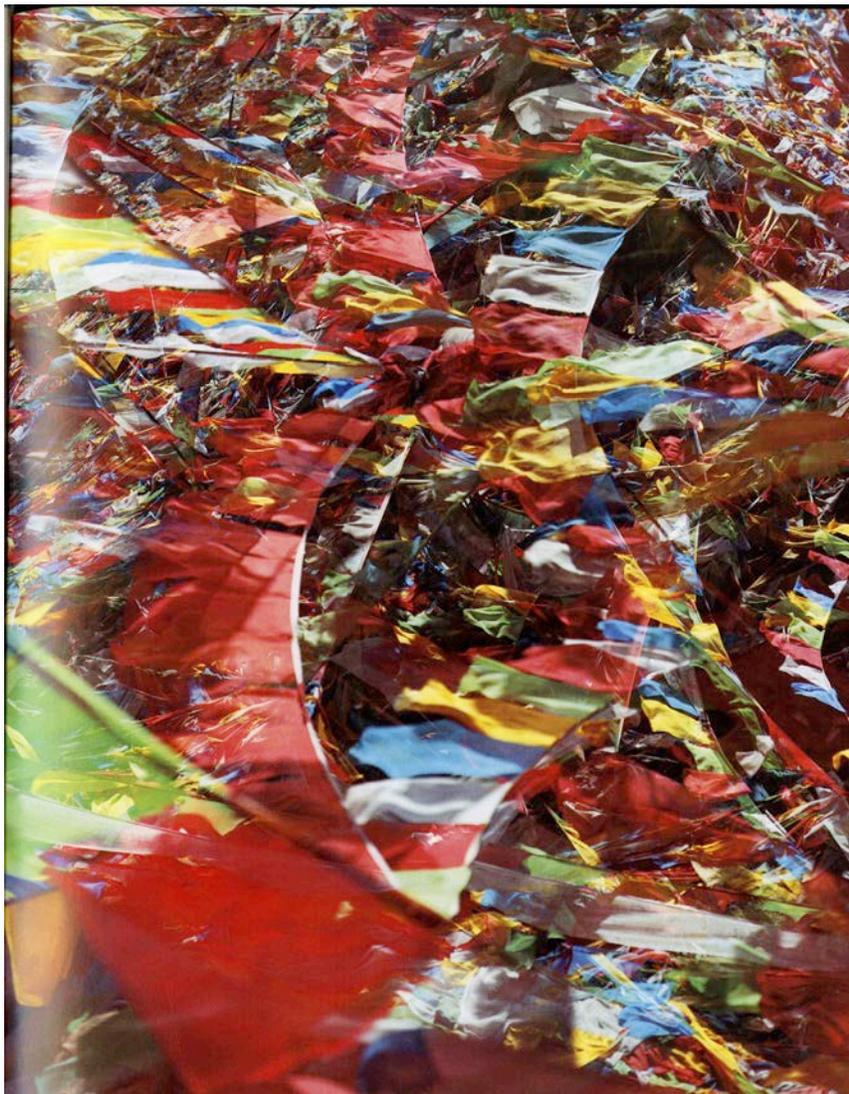


Fig. 04
Darren Almond, *Infinite Betweens: Life Between, Phase 3*. 2008, C-print, 220 x 176 cm. From: Art Now, Berlin: Taschen, 2008. Page 37.



Fig. 05
Kehinde Wiley, *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*. 2005, oil on canvas, 274.3 x 274.3 cm. From: *Art Now*, Berlin: Taschen, 2008. Page 514.

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