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Ethics and Visual Representation

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In Context

After the Avant-garde dominance of mostly white males, post-modernism and contemporary art bring something very different to the art world: a wide variety of artists of both sexes and countless races. In these movements, new approaches and philosophies have been applied towards the art world. With the expanded horizon of the art world, it has overlapped significantly with the real world creating a new entity: a world that consists of ethical concerns affecting the value, significance and reception of artistic images. Berys Gaut argues that ethical assessments have become a completely legitimate practice with a term he refers to as Ethicism (Levingson, 182). Not only can the imagery presented be evaluated in ethical terms by the viewer but also the production and execution of the images need to be considered. Especially with consideration to individuals that are involved in the process implemented by the artist. To evaluate this notion, the cases of Sally Mann's photographic series *Immediate Family* and Larry's Rivers' unreleased video *Growing* shall be looked at. In both cases, the central focus of controversy is the use of children in their works. The ethical qualities of works from Sally Mann and Larry Rivers will be investigated using the philosophical positions of Berys Gaut and Arthur Danto. Using these thinkers' ideas, *Immediate Family* and *Growing* will be evaluated both in terms of how ethics can affect the merit of works of art as well as the ethical responsibilities of the artist in the practice of art making.

The two cases of interest involving ethical concerns of artistic imagery are of Virginia native Sally Mann and New Yorker Larry Rivers. In the early 1990s Mann was the center of controversy involving the use of nude photographs of her children in a series of photographs named *Immediate Family*. More recently the late Larry Rivers has gained new attention involving an unreleased videotape titled *Growing* depicting his daughters nude, discussing their developing bodies. What is central to this discussion is how both situations seem similar on the surface yet the intent and the execution land the two artists at opposite ends of the ethical spectrum.

Sally Mann is a photographer that was born Lexington, Virginia in 1951 and has been a working photographer since the 1970s. The Gagosian Gallery summarizes her known work as consisting of “intimate portraits of her family, her young children and her husband, and for her resonant landscape work in the American South” (Gagosian). While several series of hers have gained critical acclaim, it is the series from 1992 titled, *Immediate Family*, which is of interest here. *Immediate Family* consists of about sixty images Mann has taken of her three children. Her series shows her three children in a variety of situations. The images suggest a violated childhood innocence marred by sexual, abusive and violent themes. Her children are often shown in submissive, dazed and wounded states. In her introduction of the *Immediate Family* book she describes the photos “These are photographs of my children living there lives here too. Many of these pictures are intimate, some are fictions and some are fantastic, but most are of ordinary things every mother has seen- a wet bed, a bloody nose, candy cigarettes. They dress up, they pout and posture, they paint their bodies, they dive like otters in a dark river (Mann).

In an Art:21 interview, Mann discussed that she chose her children as subject matter because they “were there” and she felt inspired to do the work (*Art in the Twentieth*

Century). She also felt that it was an acceptable practice (*Art in the Twentieth Century*). Some images appear to be a documentation of an event such as *Jessie's Cut*, in which Mann's daughter appears to be shown in the aftermath of receiving stitches. Another example of this is *Emmett's Bloody Nose*. In title, this image once again seems to be portraying a typical childhood occurrence. The image on the other hand is an intriguing depiction of a before and after of this event. Emmett is doubled and the version on the left has a very clean face with his polo shirt buttoned up nicely. He is linked together via his hand with the disheveled version to his left, which has a stream of blood draining from his nose, coating his lips and continuing to run down to his exposed shirt underneath the now unbuttoned polo. The viewer is put in an awkward spot. We stand over this child. The viewer is implicated in this wounding.

Larry Rivers was born in New York with the name of Yitzroch Loiza Grossberg in 1923 (Larry Rivers Foundation). He had a very diverse career that included music, painting and videography. Rivers is looked at as a "founding father of Pop Art" influencing artists such as Andy Warhol, who describes Rivers' as straddling the line between Pop Art and Abstract expressionism (Larry Rivers Foundation). His most notable works include *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, *O'Hara Nude with Boots* and *Double Portrait of Berdie*. Rivers died in 2002 and has been brought into the media due to the discussion of a video he shot entitled *Growing*.

Similar to Sally Mann, Larry Rivers' video *Growing* also uses children as the subject matter. This work came to media attention when part of Larry Rivers' archive was sold to New York University (Taylor). Included in this archive was the video *Growing*. *Growing* has not been show publically but it is described both as a piece of art and as a documentary of sorts. The piece was a video piece with River's daughters Emma and Gwynne as the

subjects. The video was taped in intervals over the course of five years (Taylor). The goal of the pieces was to explore “the meaning of breasts in a girl’s life” (Shnayerson, 4). Without a public version to view, all information on it is derived from descriptions by those close to Larry Rivers and his daughters. *Growing* is described in a NY Times article “In the film Rivers tells the girls to take off their clothes and then zooms in on their breasts from various angles. He interviews them about how they feel about their breasts and whether boys have started noticing them. In some scenes Clarice Rivers appears with her daughters, displaying her own breasts and talking about them” (Taylor).

The video was meant to be shown at an exhibition in 1981, but was pulled due at the request of Rivers’ wife Clarice (Taylor). It has been largely forgotten about until the sale of works to New York University. River’s daughter Emma Tamburlini, stepped forward and requested the video tape be returned to her and her sister Gwynne Rivers (Taylor).

Mann and Rivers are both pushing boundaries as many artists strive to do with their work whether it happens to be conceptually, aesthetically or ethically. A large factor of what makes a piece of art successful is the response of the viewer. Not all works of art can or need to be considered from an ethical standpoint. However, with works like *Immediate Family* and *Growing* combining nudity and children, ethical concerns arise. This leaves the problem of how the viewer should evaluate the art. University of St. Andrews Professor of Philosophy Berys Gaut presents a term, “Ethicism”, that helps identify and assesses the interaction between aesthetics and ethics and how works can either gain merit or reprehension based on this balance.

Gaut defines Ethicism as “the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works” (Levingson, 182). He further states that “if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent

aesthetically defective, if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious” (Levingson, 182). Gaut is asserting that when a work exhibits morally reprehensible attributes it demerits the work just the same as if a work exhibits morally good attributes it adds merit. He is careful to note that the ethical merits of a piece do not alone make the work good or bad (Levingson, 182).

As Gaut has articulated, in Ethicism works of art can be tilted to a more meriting or reprehensible state based on the ethical opinions observed in a piece (Levingson,182). It does not take much effort to realize why both Mann’s and Rivers’ works have drawn ethical questioning. While both artists’ shared the common denominator of utilizing their children in their work, a glaring discrepancy occurred propelling them to opposite ends of the ethical spectrum. If one considers this notion, the argument can be made that the use of children within *Immediate Family* does not only surpass Rivers’ *Growing* in terms of moral goodness, but it is also an example of how ethics contributes to the value of a piece. This is due to the breakdown of artistic representations of the children and the real world implications.

How the viewers perceive the art is a key element of what arguably makes Mann’s images pass the morality test and River’s fail. Overall, the practice of a parent taking photographs of their young children nude and in of itself is not a morally questionable idea. What do end up being problematic are the themes of sexuality, violence and abuse that are present in *Immediate Family* and *Growing*. To respond to this one must ask what does a photograph or video do. They create representations, copies. To dig deeper, in a work of art the subjects also represent something else, creating that separation of reality and art. To elaborate on the distinction of art is, Arthur Danto’s idea of indiscernible pairs can be applied. According to Danto “philosophical problems arise in connection with in

discriminable pairs, the difference between which is not a scientific one” (Ankersmit, 62). Which mean philosophical knowledge should “leave the world unchanged” leading to several philosophies creating several different “worlds” that cannot be connected (Ankersmit, 62). Danto uses an example of a Brillo Box in a store compared to one placed in a gallery setting by Andy Warhol. For all intents and purposes the two boxes are identical, yet one is elevated to the status of an art object while the other is not (Ankersmit, 62). Thus, there is a separation of the art world and the real world. If we apply this to *Immediate Family* it reinforces its status as art. Even though the photographs show the children representing the themes discussed sexuality, violence, abuse, several of the photographs are also depicting several common elements of childhood: playing in the water, getting messy, bloody noses, big bites, playing dress up. So while the images are depicting Mann’s children, through dramatic photographic practices and overt titles, the activities of the children are exaggerated and propelled into the realm of art.

Rivers runs into some issues as far as indiscernible pairs goes and that’s where some of the ethical reprehension manifests for the viewer. His video aims to document the development of breasts of his daughters. Unlike Mann’s children, Rivers’ daughters are representing themselves and the concept is directly engrained in what the girls are experiencing. There is very little fantasy. The girls are much closer to the real world than the Mann children. The developing breasts represent the stage of puberty and the entrance into the sexual world. Mann did not photograph her children nude once they hit puberty (Kent). It is an important distinction when considering the sexual content. While it is not an absolute truth that the video is not art considering there is a debate. Rivers has been quoted defending *Growing* saying “I’ve been making art all my life—why would you think this was anything else?” (Shnayerson, 4). To many, just the intent of making art is enough

to declare it so. However, the fact is that Rivers' girls cross into the realm of the real world so much that the ethical consequence is great enough to not only demerit the work but to actually question its status as art by the viewer.

The second part of the ethical assessment of *Immediate Family* and *Growing* is how the treatment of the subjects affects the morality of the pieces. Danto once again has addresses this issue in his philosophies. He focuses a lot of his discussion in the essay *The naked truth* on the rights of the subjects and the correlating responsibilities of the artist. Looking at the rights of the subjects and identity, we will once again show the different ethical paths Mann and Rivers ended up on. Danto established that a core characteristic of being human is to care about our appearances, both in terms of the self-image as well as how others see us (Levinson, 258). Through the lens of Danto's concerns Mann is shown to be in compliance to what Danto considers ethical behavior towards the subject while Rivers' is in violation.

In *The naked truth*, Danto raises the question about the symbolic self in relation to ethical behavior. He helps explain this in a story about Elizabeth the Great. In this story, Elizabeth could not stand to look at herself in the mirror anymore so she voided her life of them and had her helpers apply her makeup every day. The young girls ended up applying a small red dot to her nose in an act of cruelty. Danto asserts that she even though she was not aware she was being ridiculed she was still having pain inflicted by the subversion of her image (Levinson, 265). Sally Mann made a conscious effort to maintain a professionalism and dignity in regards to her children and to balance the rights of the artist and the subject. She seemingly never forced her children to do anything in regards to her photography that they did not want to do. Mann initially came to a decision to not publish *Immediate Family* for another decade so her children "wouldn't be living in the same

bodies” (Woodward). This actually sparked a response of disapproval from the children. Mann even sent her older two children, Emmett and Jessie to a psychologist to talk about the issues at hand and to make sure that they understood what was going on and if they could handle it. (Woodward) The three children even had a final veto power over the images that were included in the book, so any images they had objections about were omitted (Woodward). This way of working turned out to be a collaborative method of working. Danto would most likely approve of the way Mann handled her kids.

The case of *Growing* falls in a very different realm of the artist asserting his rights over the subject. In Rivers’ case the issue of the nude and nakedness is the ethical violation of the subject. Being nude is a very vulnerable and sensitive position to be in for most. Danto is in the school of thought that showing a person that is ashamed of being naked is wrong on some level (Levinson, 277). He also states that “as far as showing a subject naked, the morality of that is altogether a matter of how the subject feels about himself as seen in that way” (Levinson, 281). According to Rivers’ daughters, Emma Tamburlini and Gwynne Rivers, he placed the artist’s rights well above the subject’s. Emma tells of how if she objected at all about being filmed she would be called “uptight and a bad daughter” (Taylor). Gwynne recalls an early session of *Growing* where she felt excited about singing a song for her father and the uncomfortableness that would come when he told her to undress. (Shnayerson, 3) Both of these accounts give the subject no control over their image. Even beyond that, it takes them to a dark and derogatory place. Unlike Mann’s photos, this video isn’t just a captured moment of a child out and about. It is a staged and directed exploitation of a personal, and usually sensitive, stage in a persons’ life. Not only did his behavior create a video that is questionable as art, he also arguably caused real harm to his daughters. Emma cites the video caused her to become anorexic and that “it

wrecked a lot of my life.” Gwen told *Vanity Fair* that due in part to *Growing* she suffered with bulimia, alcohol issues as well as having a hard time with relationships: “I’m not saying it was all the film *Growing*, but ... that careless attitude on my father’s part” (Shnayerson, 1). It is hard to buy that Rivers did not understand what he was doing. Apparently the girls began to look more self-conscious as the filming went on (Taylor). Rivers himself even commented in his voice over in the film that he continued with the project regardless of “the raised eyebrows of society in general and the specific friends and even my daughters – they kept sort of complaining” (Taylor). The moment the daughters expressed disinterest or objection, Larry Rivers should have conceded.

In his essay *The naked truth*, Arthur Danto states that “Mirrors, like cameras, always tell the truth, optically speaking, but they do not always tell the moral truth” (Levinson, 263). This statement represents a critical and increasingly relevant issue many contemporary artists need address in some form or another. That issue being the ethics and ethical behavior concerning displaying imagery and the execution of those images. Sally Mann and Larry Rivers both found themselves in the crosshairs of ethical debate. Using Arthur Danto and Berrys Gaut’s guidelines, Sally Mann’s *Immediate Family* appears to pass the moral test while Larry Rivers’ *Growing* fails on multiple fronts.

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IN CONTEXT:

The Artist/Subject Relationship

Sally Mann vs. Larry Rivers

Comparing the ethical qualities between *Immediate Family* and *Growing*



Sally Mann - Emmett, Jessie and Virginia, 1989



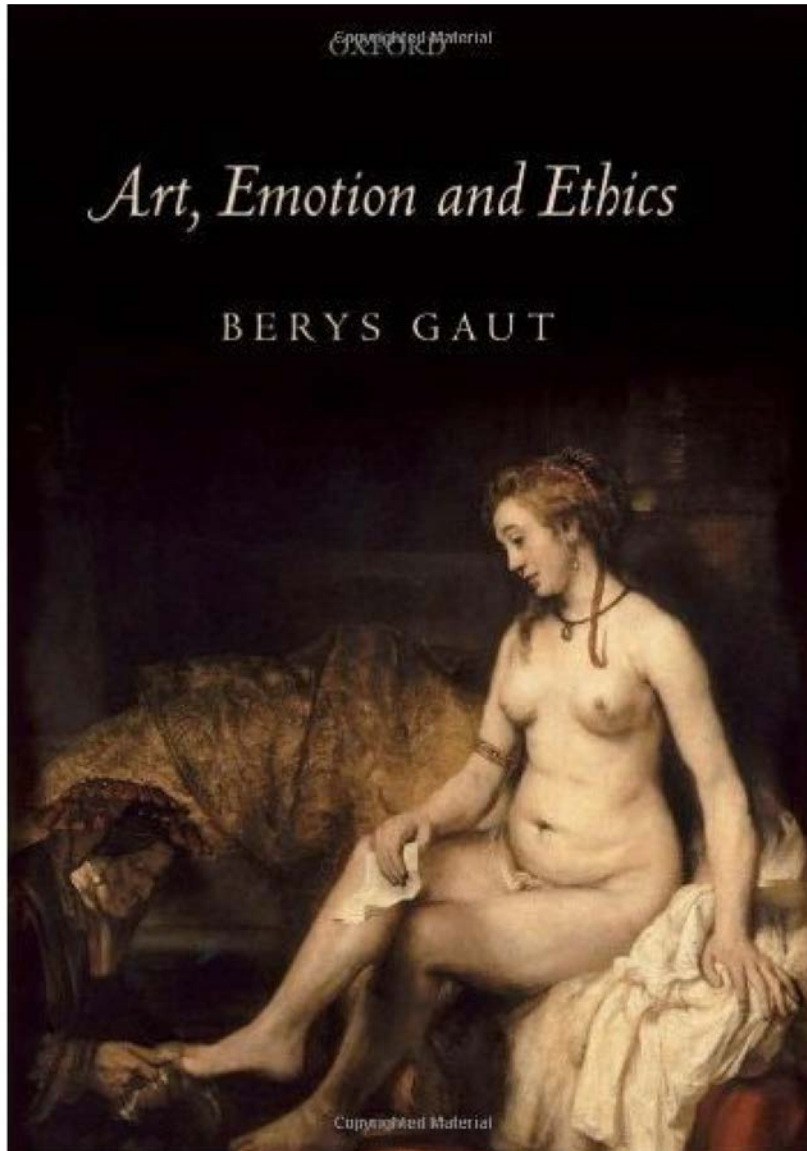
Larry Rivers, Portrait in his Studio

Ethics and Aesthetics

Does being controversial make a work of art?



Ethicism



- Berys Gaut
- **Ethicism** - “ethical assesment of attitudes manifestedby works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluations of those works”
- Manifestation of ethically commendable or reprehensible attitudes counts towards the work’s aesthetic merit or demerit.
- Each attitude is not enough to make a work successful or a failure

Ethical or Not

Sally Mann



- Ethical Content Enhances Images
- Quality of Images Surpass Family Photos
- Controversy Elevates The Photos
- Not “shock art”

Larry Rivers



- Controversy demerits Work
- Artistic element questionable/missing
- Doesn't fully surpass pornography Issue

Arthur Danto



Indiscernible Pairs



Immediate Family

Children remain representations or symbols



Damaged Child, 1984

Growing

The subjects depicted cross the line from being a symbolic representation to something that is real.



Guillermo Vargasí



Adel Abdessemed



Rights of the Subject And Nudity



Symbolic Image



Sally Mann



Emma & Blaseh Nov 1985

- Respectful
- Loving
- Collaborative
- Professional

Interview

Larry Rivers



- Selfish
- Abusive
- Neglectful
- Misguided