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Contemporary Art and Transgression

The practice of transgressive art making is not a recent phenomenon; isolated examples can be found scattered throughout the early history of the art canon. Yet they remain just that - singular flashes and anomalies unattached to specific eras.

Transgressive art as it is understood today is but the final phase of a project that has its roots in the early modernist period of the 19th century. But the history of transgressive art lies beyond the scope of this dissertation; instead we will concentrate on its deployment as practiced by contemporary artists of the last twenty years, spanning roughly the decades of the 1990s to the present.

Some of the information presented in this discussion will make reference to my previous research on the subject of transgressive art “Great Deeds Against Goya”.

The theories presented in that paper have their basis in the writings of scholar Anthony Julius and his book *Transgressions: The Offenses of Art*. Julius’ well-researched thesis will continue to inform the discussion presented here with the intention of creating a companion piece that will complete a broad overview of the nature of contemporary transgressive art.

The French intellectuals Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984) can be credited with our contemporary understanding of the term ‘transgression’ and its application in current art practices. Bataille’s use of transgression is a component of his larger idea about the human condition and its relation to economics. In *The Accursed Share*, written between 1946 and 1949, Bataille presents a theory about humanity’s need for transgressive behavior as a reaction to man’s societal constructs.

His argument relies on a Cartesian acceptance of man as the subjective animal, the self-aware creature that lives a dual nature of both belonging to and distinctly apart from the natural world. As a result of this expanded awareness of the world beyond simple existence man is compelled to set himself apart from the natural world, gathering together for mutual benefit and to keep himself occupied. For if man ‘does nothing’—that is, simply exists as animals do—then man becomes animal, a state of being which the self-aware individual cannot tolerate. So man creates work - the actions of creation and labor give his life purpose, reinforce his subjective existence through the act of work, and regulate the flow of societal stability.

But labor is an unnatural state-of-being. While man defines himself through work, he is compelled (according to his primal nature) to reject this submission. Transgressive behavior is an active return to the natural state of the world, a reconnection with the animal. What makes transgressive behavior taboo is the danger inherent in such behavior. Transgressions are unproductive; they interfere with man’s labor and disrupt the flow of society. These transgressions or ‘useless expenditures’ are enacted through such ‘games’ as eroticism, sacrifice, and art practice. All things involved in man’s social life not related to work are a disruptive act—an impulsive, violent action that surpasses the boundaries of society and cannot be subjected to order.

Michel Foucault further elaborates on Bataille’s theory of transgression by expanding the role of transgressive acts and their relationship to ethical behavior or limits. In his essay “A Preface to Transgression”, Foucault describes transgressions as not just a reaction to established order but serving the purpose of reinforcing our cultural boundaries. Transgressive acts (the breaking of unstated or stated taboos) do not seek to eradicate taboos but to push the limits of them, to cross over them for short durations and then back again to preserve the limit. If limits on

taboos are destroyed, then the measure of what is acceptable and what is not becomes irrelevant, which throws everything into the realm of limitlessness¹.

Contemporary artists have developed a particular affinity to Foucault's interpretation of transgressive behavior, attempting to exploit every inch of its meaning—with uneven results. Much of what passes for late period transgressive art can be seen as a crude attempt at shock value for its own sake rather than a substantive exploration of the art narrative. What results is a hyper-inflated sponsorship of the artist at the expense of the artwork and its content. Sensationalism has replaced substance. Julius believes this focus is misguided, a falsity that perpetuates a clichéd notion of what transgressive works of art truly represent. The authentic transgressive artist is celebrated for actions that push conventional boundaries of art making, for his or her willingness to violate the art canon and for the sake of advancing the artistic dialogue². Contemporary art which crosses boundaries is to be defined by its content, and Julius offers a substitutive proposal consisting of three unique versions or abstractions by which this content may be measured: art-rule breaking, the infringement of taboos, and a politically resistant art. The transgressing of taboos is the primary subject of “Great Deeds Against Goya” and should be referenced for an in-depth analysis of the practice. For the purpose of rounding out the examination of transgressive art making we will instead concentrate on art rule-breaking.

Julius describes art rule-breaking as “...everything from given painterly conventions to painting's commonly understood limits, that is to say, everything from *how* paintings are to be executed to *what* paintings can be” (103). Such performances are not a modern invention, but in current application often revolve around a defiance of the historic practice of art, specifically the parameters as defined by accepted academic standards and traditions. Art rule-breaking often takes aim at these standards as perceived limitations on an artist's freedom of expression, and can be divided into two sub-categories: innovative rule-breaking and interrogative rule-breaking.

The desire to escape from oppressive restrictions often results in groundbreaking innovations that expand the art canon and present a new way of understanding and creating art. During the late 19th century, Paul Cezanne's (1839 – 1906) flattened still life paintings broke with accepted traditions about how the genre is typically represented (fig. 1). By distorting the illusion of spatial depth and perspective Cezanne increased the boundaries of the art sphere, opening the way for the explosive creativity brought forth in the late modernist period and Abstract Expressionist movement of the 20th century. While it can be argued that standards of academic art practice have been all but abolished in the late transgressive era, the occasional advancement reinvigorates certain genres and is cause for excitement.

English artist Antony Micallef (1975 -) continues the practice of innovative rule-breaking in the genre of portraiture with an open-ended series of portraits that deftly illustrate the postmodern interpretation of the fragmented self. Observing one of his 'Heads', the viewer is confronted with an image that has no discernable link to anything based in reality. Charcoal is wielded like a blunt tool of destruction, smearing features and obliterating details that describe the face (fig. 2). Paint is dripped, dragged and splashed across the heads creating a mask of non-identity. The introduction of animal features such as ears, snouts and fang-like dentia generate a man-animal hybridization of an uncomfortable nature (fig. 3).

In his expansive theoretical study *Portraiture*, noted art historian Richard Brilliant outlines three key components that present the function of the portrait in art: obtaining a recognizable likeness through mimetic technique, revealing some essential nature of the sitter's character through psychological 'digging', and the subject's cultural identification with a social designation in society (a police officer, a business owner, a senator, etc.)³. Using both drawing and painting as a vehicle, Micallef has created a body of work that has up-ended what constitutes

these rules and guidelines of traditional portraiture. In Micallef's words from the press release to his 2010 solo show, *A Little Piece of Me*:

These Heads are simply about looking...It's me, alone, with just a mirror. But the intention isn't to make a self-portrait. Instead, it's to capture an emotion. I look at my own head as simply a method to help find these faces from within the paper, to purge them out. I feel it's important to paint from life while I'm creating these Heads, as it's the only way to capture a visceral, fleeting glimpse that can be impossible to obtain from a photograph.

What Micallef has done in typical postmodern fashion is supplant the importance of the individual with a form of generic identity. The topographical 'who' of the portrait (its details of likeness and character makeup) disintegrates, replaced with nothing more than a depiction of a nebulously defined emotion. But in this aspect it must be noted that Micallef does not truly succeed in the endeavor.

Despite his claim that the 'Heads' are not self-portraiture, Micallef's use of himself as the model to portray emotion betrays the very self-reflecting nature of the images. He is the model and expresser of the emotional state; therefore the 'Heads' can be assessed as a representation of Micallef's self and his emotional state-of-being. This places the 'Heads' squarely in the genre of self-portraiture regardless of the tactile manipulation of the materials and surface. Despite his best intentions of creating a non-self image Micallef has indeed done so, though in no way should it detract from the power of his images.

An additional subcategory to transgression against the art canon lies within an interrogative approach to art practices. This methodology seeks not to break the boundaries of recognized artistic borders but to act as its title implies: to interrogate. It fulfills a dualistic role of being both an example of art practice and an attempt to stretch the definitions of what comprises art. It is an art that comes closest to the breaking of taboos, in that the very project of art is the boundary to be crossed and back again to preservation.

Marcel Duchamp's (1887 – 1968) entire career revolved around a provocation of how art is both to be received and judged, and his 'readymades' ask whether the objects can be called art at all. By submitting *Fountain* (1917) (fig. 4) to the public, Duchamp playfully invited the viewer to determine if his urinal can be described as art—either answer creating a dangerous implication. If *Fountain* is art, then art's conventionally understood boundaries are exponentially increased and art's unique existence is imperiled—"if art can be anything, then it is nothing in its own right", to quote Julius (123). If one dismisses *Fountain* as an art object then limits are put on what art can be to the exclusion of all else.

A powerful example of such interrogation can be found in conceptual artist Michael Craig-Martin's (1941 -) installation piece *An Oak Tree* (1973) (fig. 5). *An Oak Tree* consists of a glass of water perched on a glass shelf suspended on a wall high above eye level, with an accompanying text located at the viewer's level. The textual component consists of several questions and answers composed by the artist that explain in a semiotic way the nature of the installation. This debate revolves around Martin's statement that the glass of water has physically changed to an oak tree, and that despite its continued visual resemblance to a glass of water, it is nonetheless an oak tree.

This echoes the Duchampian question of what can be considered art. The 'oak tree' is clearly a glass of water, but because the artist asserts that is something else, does that make it so? Martin believes this to be true. By employing the interrogative rule-breaking method of transgression, Martin not only questions the authenticity of preconceived notions of what is art but also the artist-audience relationship. That relationship is grounded in a degree of trust or faith:

I considered that in *An Oak Tree* I had deconstructed the work of art in such a way as to reveal its single basic and essential element, belief that is the confident faith of the artist in his capacity to speak and the willing faith of the viewer in accepting what he has to say. In other words belief

underlies our whole experience of art: it accounts for why some people are artists and others are not, why some people dismiss works of art others highly praise, and why something we know to be great does not always move us. (Michael Craig-Martin: *Landscapes*, 20).

This faith on the part of both artist and audience is overtly marked with spiritual overtones. The textual questions and answers that accompany *An Oak Tree* address the idea of faith over impossibility, and directly correspond to Martin's Catholic background and the belief in transubstantiation:

The ability to believe that an object is something other than its physical appearance indicates requires a transformative vision. This type of seeing (and knowing) is at the heart of conceptual thinking processes, by which intellectual and emotional values are conferred on images and objects. *An Oak Tree* uses religious faith as a metaphor for this belief system... (Manchester)

Beyond the question of 'Can this be art?' Martin asks, 'Can this be art based on your (the viewer) faith in my vision?'

Transgressive art practices rarely go unchallenged. It is often left to artists and their supporters to not only defend taboo-breaking art, but to place it in a contextual frame that seeks to assuage outrage and educate the audience about a particular artwork. Julius has determined that three types of defense have been enlisted throughout the historical era of transgressive art: the estrangement defense, the formalist defense and the canonic defense⁴. Of the three the estrangement defense is considered the most important of the defenses, in that its primary use is to reveal that artwork which attempts to shock the viewer does so to wake the viewer from complacencies and conventions⁵.

The canonic defense is perhaps the most palatable form of explaining transgressive artworks in that it makes use of the entire history of art from which to draw relevant comparisons. It attempts to place a transgressive work squarely within the art canon as a logical progression from established traditions. The defense does not seek to dismiss the viewer's shock,

nor curry it, but rather acknowledge it as a temporary experience and coerce an acceptance of the work as art. By referring to the historical lineage of art the canonic defense takes what appears to have no forbearance and, by use of precedents previously established as accepted art, creates a relationship between the two. This authentication serves as a history lesson for the viewer who (it is theorized) will overcome the initial shock and come to an acceptance of the offensive art.

The German-born English painter Lucien Freud (1922 – 2011) maintained an extensive and fruitful career that primarily centered around psychological studies of subjects that showcased a deep and subtle level of execution. Utilizing family, friends and favored models, Freud often depicted his subjects nude and in unusual poses. Creating compositions of remarkable tension from the prone figures splayed across (or removed from) beds and couches, the viewer is allowed access into the emotional world of the subjects. Add to this the willingness of the models to be painted in a visually un-protected state and an empathetic relationship is developed with the audience.

These paintings can be off-putting to the uninitiated as Freud abandons the conventional aesthetic aspects of depicting the nude form and embraces the representation of a naked. *Nude with a Leg Up* (1992) is an example of the potential degree of uncomfortability experienced by the viewer (fig. 6). Not only is the male model wholly removed from the adjacent bed, but with one leg upon the mattress we are given a near-clinical view of his genitals. This can be considered a transgressive act against the established art practice of nude male depiction: the viewer is exposed not only to the penis, but to the testicles, prostate and underside of the anus—all of which can be considered to be very personal, very taboo, and near pornographic.

The canonic defense to this type of art is difficult but not impossible. One must dig deep into the past to offer an antecedent to Freud's transgression. An example of near legendary proportions comes to us from the mid-19th century Realist movement spearheaded by the French

painter Gustave Courbet (1819 – 1877). Courbet can be considered a transgressive artist of his own time, often courting controversy by rejecting conventional subject matter in favor of addressing social issues considered vulgar by the art establishment. Themes delineating the conditions of peasantry and the working poor were considered to be in bad taste when compared to the prevalent Romantic and Neoclassical schools of the era.

This provocation of aesthetic and conceptual standards extended to his portrayals of the nude, culminating in perhaps the most transgressive painting of the 19th century, *L'Origine du Monde* (*The Origin of the World*). The painting presents a close-up of the genitalia and abdomen of a naked woman lying on a bed, legs spread (fig. 7). Executed as a commission for the erotic collection of a Turkish diplomat in 1866, the painting found its home through a succession of private collections (including philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan) before being purchased by the Musee d'Orsay.

Now available to the viewing public at large, the painting still holds the power to create shock and dismay nearly 150 years after its creation. In 2009 the police in Braga, Portugal confiscated the book *Pornocratie* by author Catherine Breillat who used the painting as the cover image. The reason given was the necessity to maintain public order since Portuguese law forbids the display of 'pornographic' images in public⁶.

Perhaps the weakest form of defense for contemporary transgressive art making lies with the formalist defense. This argument was used heavily to assist the various abstract movements of the early-to-mid 20th century to offset the non-representational nature of painting. The formalist defense concentrates on the relationship between artist and materials and the examination of the aesthetic possibilities. A blank canvas becomes a surface upon which the artist explores form, placement, design and texture. Subject matter must not interfere with

contemplation of aesthetic form, and any shock or misgiving about a work of art is misplaced.

From Julius' explanation:

It is the job of art to explore form. Art has no vocation either to change opinions in, or offer reflections of, the world...It contemplates itself, not external reality. The spectator must learn to be contemplative. He must reflect on art's self-absorption, losing himself in the beauties of its narcissism. (36)

Part of the difficulty for defenders of transgressive artwork is that much of contemporary art as currently practiced has rejected academic formalism and the deliberate mastery of craft; it does not appear applicable to works so heavily reliant on conceptual content and non-traditional art materials.

There are exceptions to the rule. English painter Jenny Saville (1970 -) is one of the better known success stories to emerge from the Young British Artist movement of the 1990s. Working with distinct concepts of femininity, body types and intrusive augmentation and surgery, Saville paints figurative works on a large scale in a purposefully loose yet realistic manner. Her attention to craft is quite evident in her painting *Passage* (2004). The painting is executed on a large scale measuring 11' x 9' and depicts a naked male transvestite (fig. 8). *Passage* is a powerful painting brimming with transgression. The model sits in a semi-reclined pose, legs spread apart to reveal an unobscured view of the genitals (again, Courbet and Freud). What causes further distress to the viewer are the breast implants that serve as a point of uncertainty to the previously determined gender identification. As the audience gazes up the length of the figure and looks to the face for some answer to the gender question, they are confronted with a fleshy portrait that is further ambiguous as to its sex. Using a kind of postmodern aesthetic, Saville asks the audience to question their preconceived ideas of gender roles, to ruminate on the fragmentation of the self and what constitutes an individual identity in the 21st century.

Saville has constructed a brilliant piece of transgressive art that skillfully manipulates the viewer through a visual path of emotional and psychological turmoil. Yet this commanding manipulation is referred to only in passing in an interview conducted with noted art historian Simon Schama in 2005:

Jenny Saville: With the transvestite I was searching for a body that was between genders...I wanted to paint a visual passage through gender—a sort of gender landscape. To scale from the penis, across a stomach to the breasts, and finally the head. I tried to make the lips and eyes be very seductive and use directional mark making to move your eye around the flesh.... I have to really work at the tension between getting the paint to have the sensory quality that I want and be constructive in terms of building the form of a stomach, for example, or creating the inner crevice of a thigh. The more I do it, the more the space between abstraction and figuration becomes interesting. I want a painting realism. I try to consider the pace of a painting, of active and quiet areas. Listening to music helps a lot, especially music where there's a hard sound and then soft breathable passages. In my earlier work my marks were less varied. I think of each mark or area as having the possibility of carrying a sensation⁷.

By affecting an indifference to the deep meaning behind *Passage* and instead concentrating on its formal aspects, Saville defeats the clout expressed by the painting, encouraging critical justification and a disregard of the indispensable features of the work.

The era of transgressive art as practiced for the past century has found its place in the specific narrative of Western art that has been continuously modified and reinvented for centuries. It has proven to be an inventive and resilient genre of art, having been assimilated and accepted into Western culture where it has found other venues for expression: the fields of literature, music and the performing arts have all benefitted from its influence. But it is a trend that has a finite lifespan like many of the movements that preceded it. Transgressive art is coming to the end of its cycle, and evidence of this can be found in many of the unhealthy byproducts of its authority. Julius offers many pages of theoretical reasons behind the end of the transgressive period—far too many to encapsule in a few paragraphs without misinterpretation⁸.

However, there is one important aspect of the consequences of transgressive art making I believe permeates the contemporary art world at this junction in time.

Despite the hard-fought battles against the tyranny of the art canon, each successive generation of transgressive artists accepts the triumph of the avant-garde over academia to be complete. There is no longer an ‘academy’ to fight against, simply because the avant-garde has successfully supplanted the old authority and is now the new ‘academy’—the new authoritative voice that determines the new limits⁹. There are no more rules to break since all that can be transgressed has been done—everything is open to investigation. Contemporary artists have recklessly broken the barriers of ethical behavior, manifesting Foucault’s warning: that limits are to be preserved—to break them is to find limitlessness. The idea has a connection to Arthur Danto’s theory of the end of Art.

Danto’s explosive essay “The End of Art” and its companion anthology of essays *After the End of Art* have as their basic foundations a specific interpretation of the history of Western art. That premises states the narrative of art history can be seen as a series of logical progressions of both practice and concept, broken into eras marked by how art was made and how art was defined. The Gothic era was succeeded by the Renaissance which gave way to the Baroque, to Rococco, and so on to the present. What marked the end of this sprawling narrative began in the mid-to-late modernist period, when art had seemingly reached the limits of its tactile and representational nature and turned inward to reflect upon itself¹⁰. Art moved from being mimetic in nature to a philosophical stance. This introspection ended (according to Danto) with Pop Art and Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*¹¹. Danto concludes that everything after Warhol represents a post-historical narrative, one that has closed the book on this specific narrative of Western art and left all boundaries available for investigation by contemporary artists.

Julius suggests that while Danto's theory has limitations, its influence has made a significant impact on contemporary art. Transgressive artists have run unchecked against taboos, attempting to destroy the limits rather than to preserve them. By this behavior, artists have proceeded beyond sincere and intelligent inquiry into the realm of shock art, an art which transgresses boundaries to truly hurt their audience¹². Rather than spark debate on a deep and enriched level, many of today's transgressive practitioners bludgeon the viewing public with shallow amateur spectacles that offer none of the jolts that lead to an exploration of larger meta-narratives. Instead the viewer is often repelled, left with an anxious and uncomfortable experience best never to be repeated. Art takes a diminished role in the culture, becoming another bit of flotsam in the ever-widening pool of moral and ethical decay. Any installation piece by Jake and Dinos Chapman can make this argument. Honest transgressive art was not meant to fulfill this kind of role, and it is imperative that the succeeding generations of artists reassess the function of art and its responsibilities in the 21st century and beyond.

NOTES

1. See Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression”, 72-74 in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*.
2. See Julius, 100-103.
3. See Brilliant, 15.
4. See Julius, 25-51.
5. For an in depth analysis of the estrangement defense, see “Great Deeds Against Goya”.
6. See Lusa, “PSP Seizes Books Considered Pornographic with Courbet Picture on Cover”.
7. See Schama, “Interview with Jenny Saville”, in *Jenny Saville*.
8. Julius offers at least seven reasons and explanations addressing the end of the transgressive period. See Julius, 189-196.
9. *Ibid.*, 198-202.
10. *Ibid.*, 202.
11. See Danto, 123-125.
12. See Julius, 207-209.

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Fig. 1 Paul Cezanne, *Still Life with Peaches and Pears*, 1890



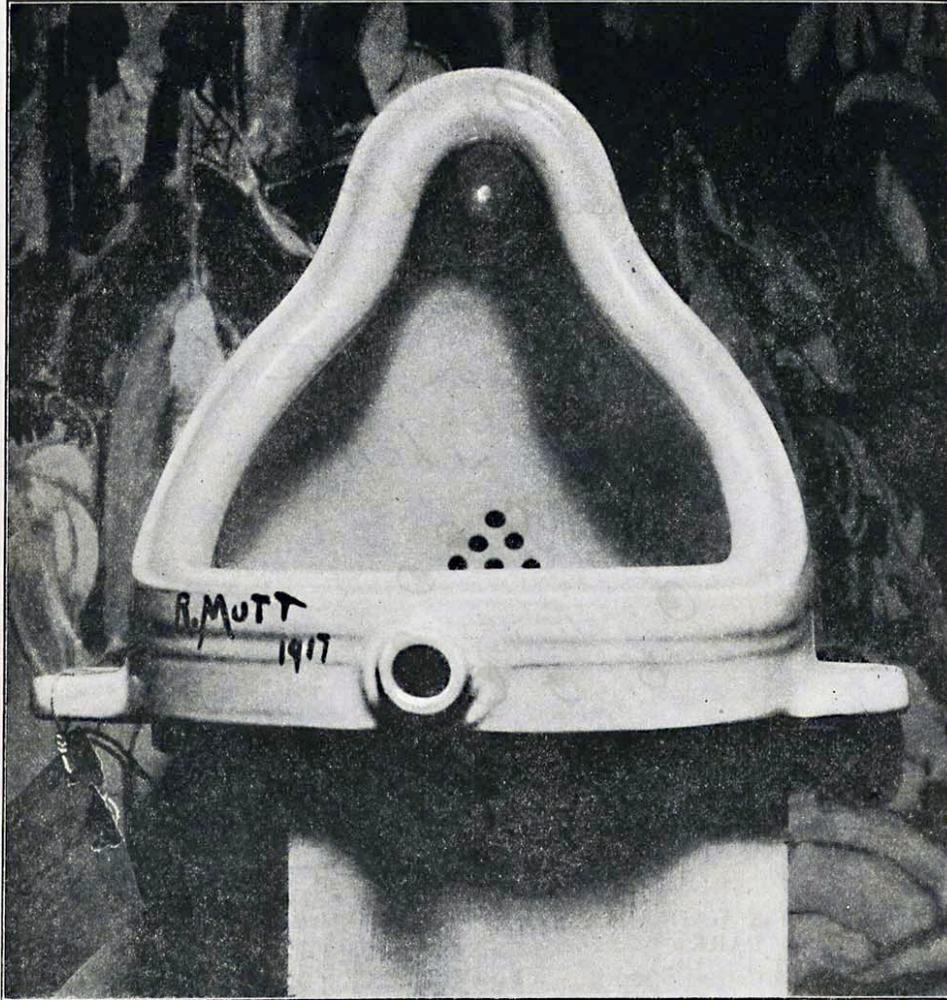
Fig. 2 Antony Micallef, *Head 4*, 2005



Fig. 3 Antony Micallef, *Half Dog*, 2008

Fountain by R. Mutt

Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz



THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS

Fig. 4 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917



Fig. 5 Michael Craig Martin, *An Oak Tree*, 1973



Fig. 6 Lucien Freud, *Nude with a Leg Up*, 1992

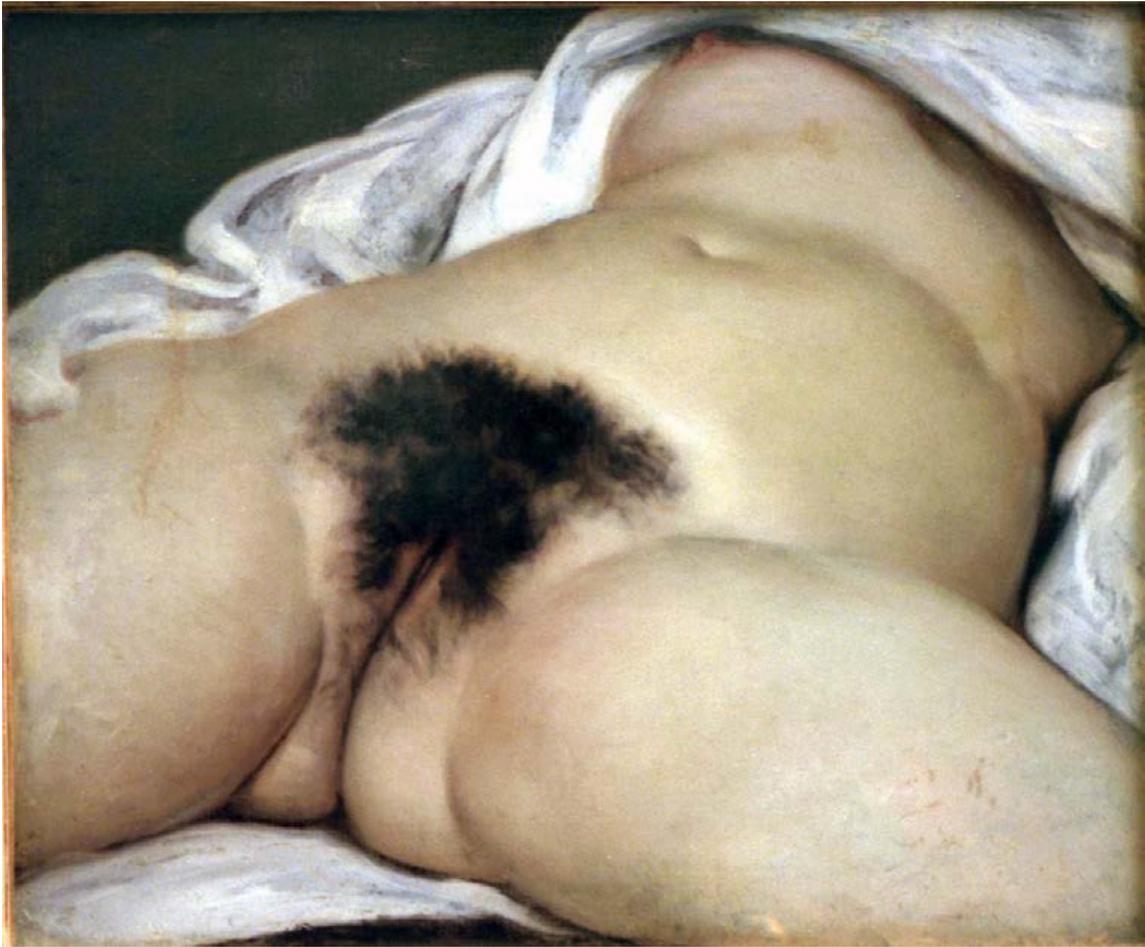


Fig. 7 Gustave Courbet, *L'Origine du Monde* (*The Origin of the World*), 1866



Fig. 8 Jenny Saville, *Passage*, 2004

Art & Transgression



Annie Sprinkle *A Public Cervix Announcement*, 1990



Georges Bataille (1897-1962)



Michel Foucault (1926-1984)

The Contemporary Transgressive Artist

- In contemporary cultural discourse, the term has come to be associated with a received idea of the artist as lawless, necessarily violating the conventional and lawful in the realization of his genius (therefore committing a transgression).
- Rules are a constraint on creativity; the art canon is a tyranny from which he must free himself. This is the heroism of the artist, a transgressor for the sake of art.
- This notion promotes the artist at the expense of the artwork.



Jenny Saville

Art-Rule Breaking

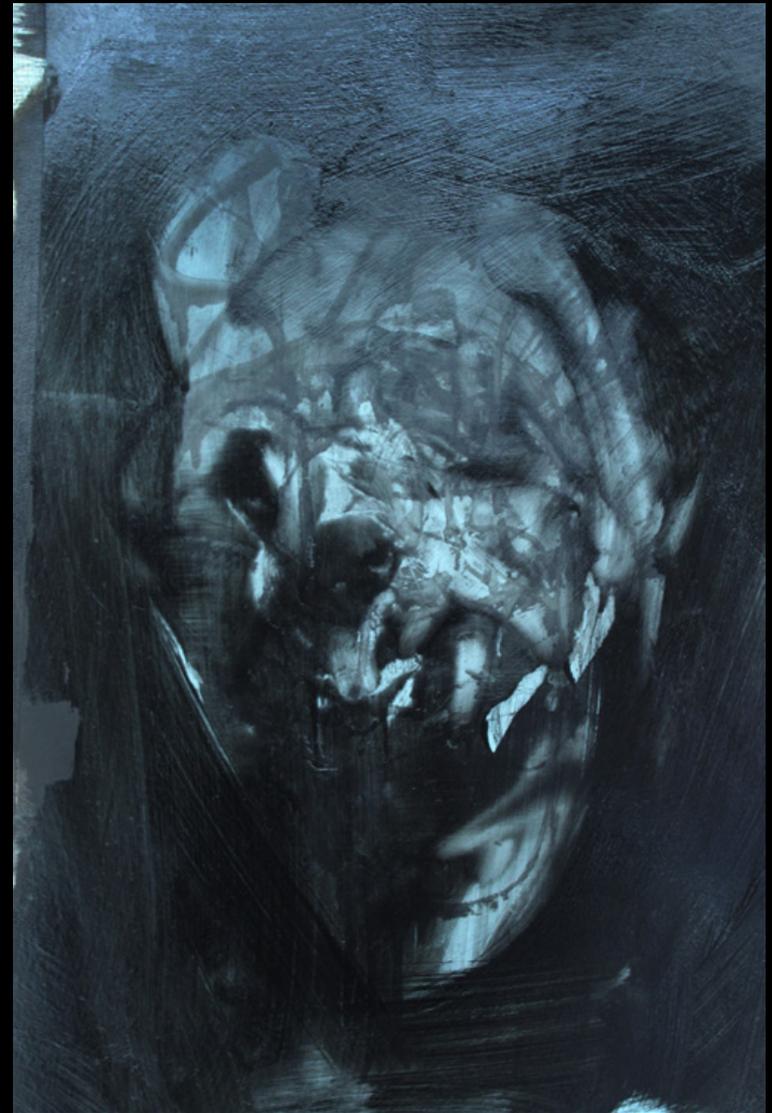


Edouard Manet *Le Dejeuner sur L'Herbe*, 1863

Innovative-Rule Breaking



Antony Micallef *Head 4*, 2005



Antony Micallef *Half Dog*, 2008

Interrogative-Rule Breaking



Tracey Emin *My Bed*, 1998

The Estrangement Defense

Artwork exists to shock us into grasping some truth about ourselves, the world or art itself. It endorses an art which shatters illusions, exposes prejudice, and suspends received wisdom. It estranges us from the familiar; it denies us the pleasure of easy recognition. It momentarily alienates us from everyday reality.

Art teaches us a lesson; its shocks and disturbances are justified by this overriding purpose.



Anselm Kiefer *Heroic Symbols*, 1968



Anselm Kiefer *Occupation*, 1968

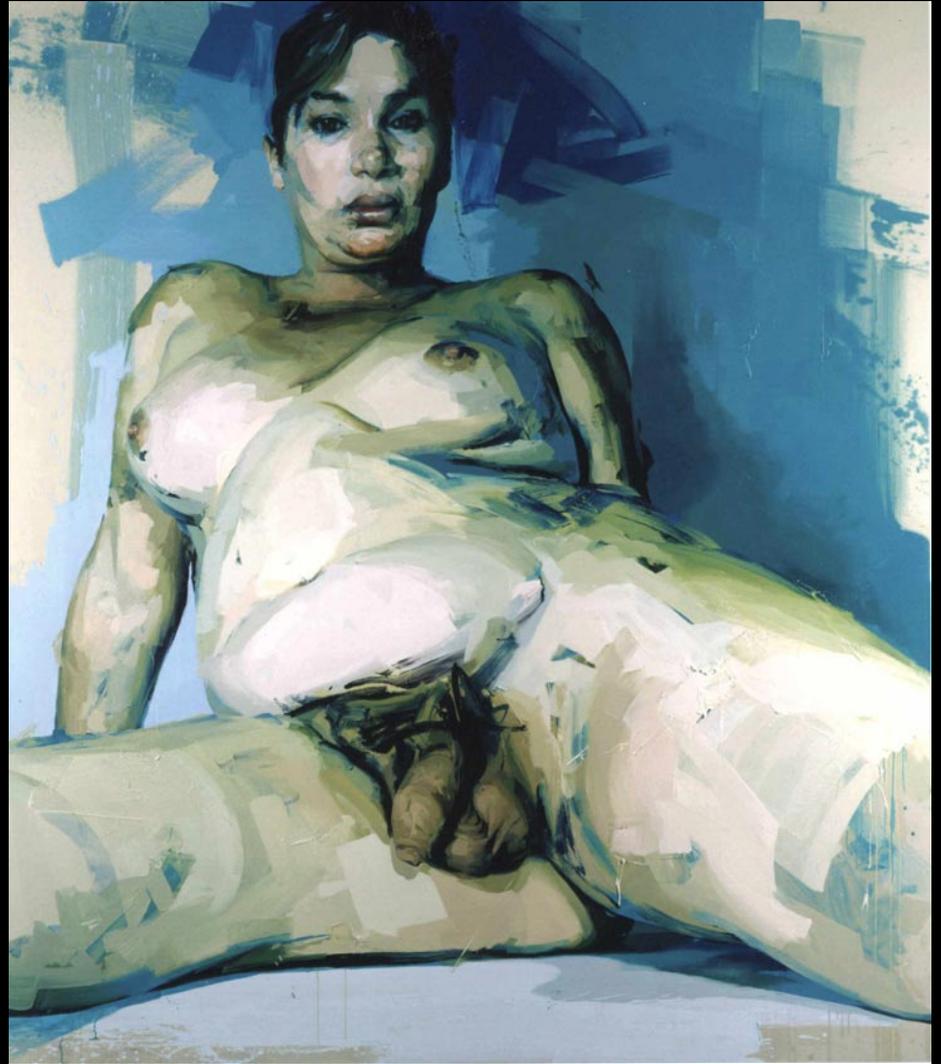


Caspar David Friedrich
Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog 1818

The Formalist Defense

Insists upon the form of the artwork rather than the subject of the work. It is the job of art to explore form. Art has no vocation either to change opinions in, or offer reflections of, the world. It contemplates itself, not the external world.

It is not principally the shape and structure of the artwork, but rather the character of the surface of the work, which is the product of the engagement of the artist with his or her given materials.



Jenny Saville *Passage*, 2004

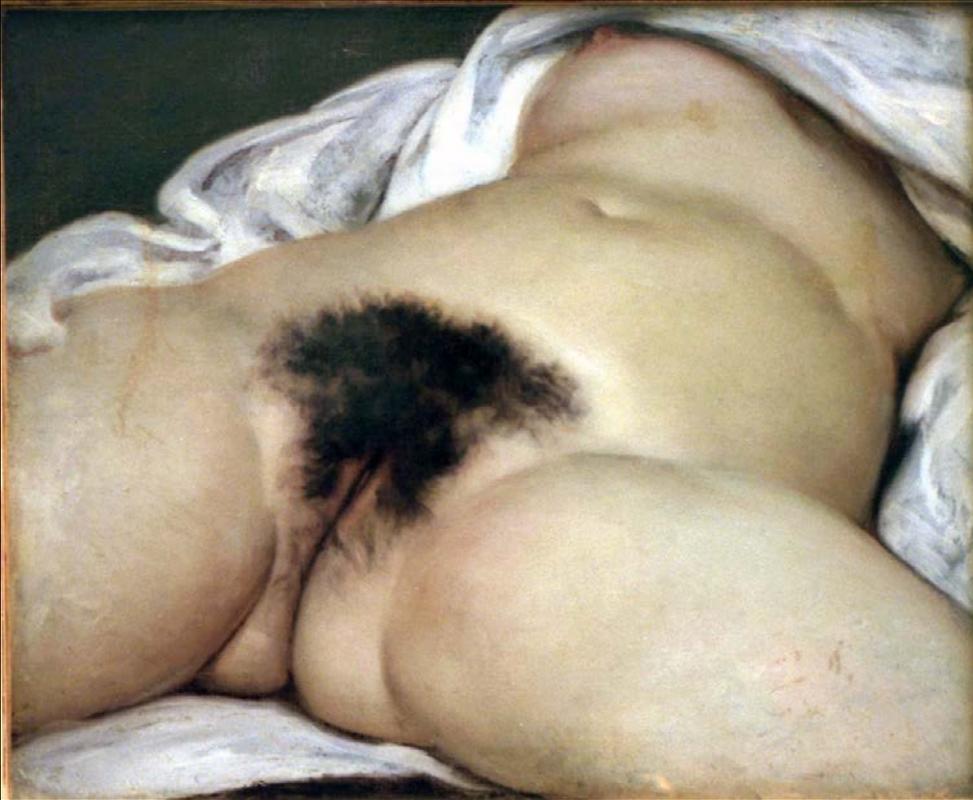
The Canonic Defense

Identifies and accepts both the Estrangement and Formalist defenses, but attempts to support the work as belonging within the historical tradition of Art history. What appears as radically new and without antecedents is shown to be related to earlier artworks, and thus is vindicated as art by this lineage.

Time-proven art is thus enlisted in support of new art.



Lucien Freud *Nude with a Leg Up*, 1992



Gustav Courbet *The Origin of The World*, 1866



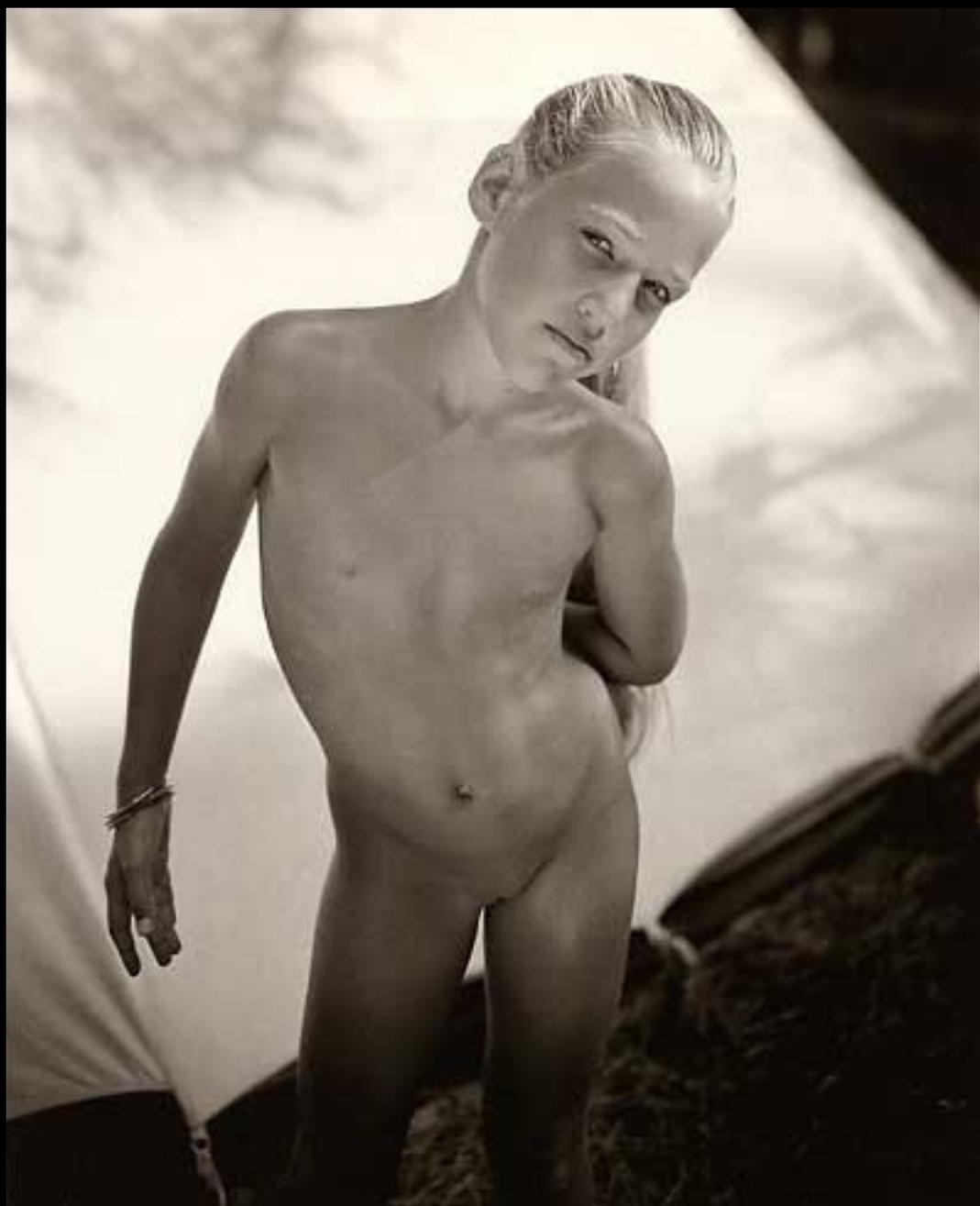
James McNeil Whistler *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862

Taboo-Breaking

- Unlike established rules of law used to regulate a society, taboos are more difficult to define and of a complex nature.
- They are experienced in a less systematized fashion than prescribed ways of learning, and tend to be related to cultural identity - often reflecting the ethical beliefs of entire societies.
- Taboos are instinctive and inconsistent. Entrenched as they are in custom and religious beliefs, they police aspects of our lives outside of the moral spectrum.
- The transgressive artists seek to blur and disrupt these boundaries.



Jock Sturgis *Vanessa; Le Porge, France, 2002*





Jock Sturgis *Paris, France, 1984*

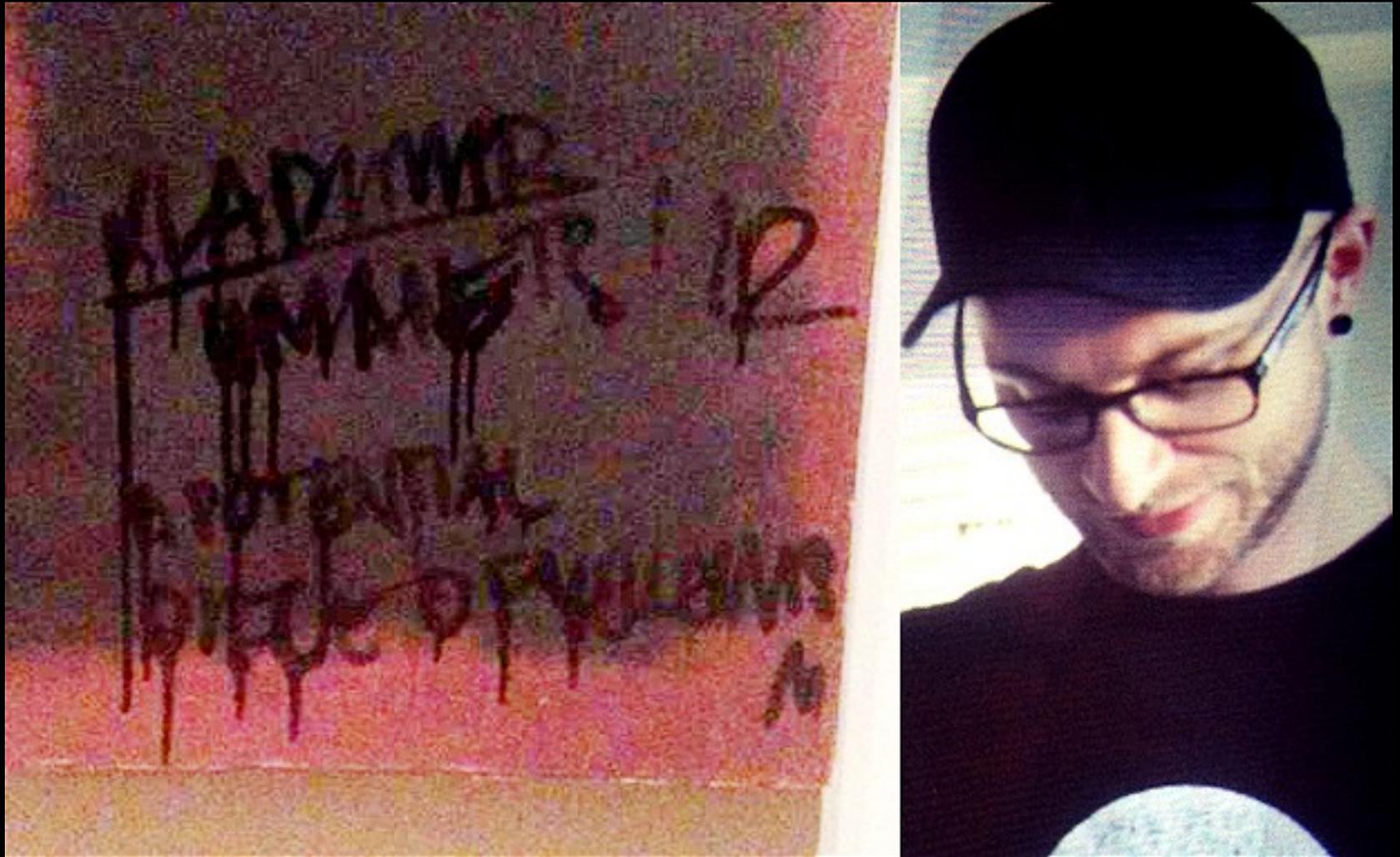


Randall Terry





Mark Rothko *Black on Maroon*, 1958



Vladimir Umanets *A Potential Piece of Yellowism*, 2012