

**Beyond Provocation:**

**How Viewers make Sense of Transgressive Taboo Art**

**by**

**Miranda Winn**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF**

**THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**in**

**The Faculty of Graduate Studies**

**(Curriculum and Pedagogy)**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

**(Vancouver)**

**April, 2012**

**© Miranda Winn, 2012**

## **Abstract**

Transgressive taboo art refers to a controversial visual art genre that deliberately discomforts its viewing audience by provocatively questioning commonly held values and widely accepted socio-cultural constructs. Within this provocation lies the potential for transformative critical reflection, as viewers recursively examine personal acceptance of socio-cultural constructs. But just as this art genre can enlighten, it also can outrage. To unpack the diversity of viewer exchange, the research presented here investigates circumstances in which novice viewers experience a pedagogic interplay and circumstances that cripple the meaning making process. As this contentious genre has largely been avoided by art educators, these findings are then used to make recommendations for optimal inclusion within an educational context. To investigate this complex process, 19 participants were extensively interviewed before, during and after they viewed three transgressive taboo artworks. Transcribed data indicates that viewers approach transgressive taboo art as both an artwork and a problem position. While most participants react with responses similar to traditional art such as comments on colour and composition, they may also engage emotionally and intellectually to the dilemma that the work presents. Often this intellectual engagement begins from an established self-position, then moves outward to the consideration of alternative perspectives. Circumstances that optimize a meaningful viewer exchange include willingness to engage dialogue openly examining intra and interpersonal values and beliefs. Circumstances that thwart engagement include an unending pursuit of artist message, anger due to a significant and specific breach in personal values, cynicism towards the artist/art world, and/or lack of knowledge. Strikingly, strong

negative emotional responses and/or traditional art preferences do not necessarily impede viewers from having a meaningful exchange. Recommendations for the inclusion of transgressive taboo art within an educational context include: choosing pieces with pedagogic potential, an emphasis on sincere open dialogue, student self-awareness of personal hot points, exploration of related art history and providing students with guidelines for interpretation and a framework to facilitate art criticism. Recommendations also include two additional steps to the traditional interpretive process of description, interpretation, and evaluation, which include acknowledgement of emotional response and critical reflection of personal/cultural value set(s).

## **Preface**

As human subjects were interviewed during this research, Behavioural Research Ethic Board approval was sought and granted on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

Ethics certificate and approval number H11-01526

**Table of Contents**

Abstract .....ii

Table of Contents .....iv

List of Illustrations ..... x

Acknowledgements.....xi

Dedication.....xii

**Chapter 1: Introduction** ..... 1

The Emergence of Transgressive Art ..... 2

Transgressive Taboo Art ..... 4

Personal Experience as Artist and Educator..... 6

Transgressive Art in the Educational Context..... 8

Prior Research as a Launching Point for Further Research ..... 10

**Chapter 2: Literature Review** ..... 13

**Chapter 3: Methodology** ..... 28

Participants..... 28

Interview Process .....	30
The Artwork .....	29
Piece #1 Fox Face Platter.....	33
Piece #2 Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross.....	34
Piece #3 Helena .....	35
Hiatus .....	36
Limitations.....	36
Coding .....	38
<b>Chapter 4: Interview Data.....</b>	<b>42</b>
Part One of Interview- Habits of Artistic Expectation .....	42
Participant’s Artistic Preferences .....	42
Roles Art Plays in Participants Lives .....	43
Roles Art Plays in Society.....	44
What Art Is.....	45
What Art Isn’t .....	47

Part Two of Interview- Making Meaning with a Selection of Transgressive Taboo Art....	48
.....	48
<i>Fox Face Platter</i> by Scott a.a. Bibus .....	48
Emotional Response and its Effect on Interpretation .....	50
Use of Title.....	51
Is it Art? .....	52
<i>Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross</i> by Priscilla Bracks.....	53
Emotional Response.....	54
Juxtaposition of “Good” and “Evil”.....	55
Use of Title.....	56
Is it Art? .....	57
<i>Helena</i> by Marco Evanistti .....	57
Initial Emotional Response .....	58
Finding Meaning .....	59
Use of Title.....	60
Use of Goldfish .....	60

Emotional Impact on Making Meaning .....	62
Is it Art? .....	63
Effect of Hiatus .....	64
<b>Chapter 5: Data Analysis</b> .....	<b>66</b>
Evaluation Acts .....	66
Colour and Composition .....	67
Search for Metaphor .....	68
Use of Title.....	70
Narration and Art/Artist Message.....	72
Self-Positioning.....	74
The Power of Dialogue .....	78
Impact of Established Expectations .....	83
Those who were Unable or Unwilling to Make Meaning .....	85
<b>Chapter Six: Research Conclusions</b> .....	<b>90</b>
Willingness.....	90
Process of Making Meaning through Discourse.....	91

Artist Message .....	92
Viewer as Creator of Meaning .....	93
Art Expectations and Personal Limitations .....	95
Summary of Research Findings.....	96
<b>Chapter Seven: Transgressive Art in an Educational Setting .....</b>	<b>98</b>
Recommendations for Incorporating Transgressive Art into an Educational Setting .....	101
.....	101
Art with Pedagogic Potential .....	101
Artist Sincerity and Intent.....	101
Discomfort and Dialogue .....	102
Art to Art Connections.....	104
Art Criticism .....	105
Conclusion .....	110
Further Research.....	111
Final Note .....	113

**References** ..... 112

**Appendices**

Appendix A: Advertisement for Participant Participation..... 123

Appendix B: Informed Consent ..... 125

## List of Figures

Figure 1 <i>Olympia</i> by Edouard Manet .....	2
Figure 2 <i>Fox Face Platter</i> by Scott a.a.Bibus .....	33
Figure 3 <i>Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross</i> by Priscilla Bracks.....	34
Figure 4 <i>Helena</i> by Marco Evanisti .....	35
Figure 5 <i>Still Life with Game Birds</i> by Cornelius Mahu .....	48
Figure 6 <i>Helena</i> by Marco Evanisti .....	58
Figure 7 <i>Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross</i> by Priscilla Bracks.....	69

## **Acknowledgements**

I offer my sincere and enduring gratitude to the faculty, staff, and students at UBC who have supported and inspired my work in art education. I owe a particular thanks to Dr. Rita Irwin, whose wisdom, encouragement, and humour helped me through this rewarding journey. I would also like to thank Dr. Kit Grauer for her valuable insight and compassionate counsel. As well, a sincere thanks to Dr. Susan Gerofsky, who provided much needed guidance and support.

In addition, I must also thank my parents, my husband and my friends. Your support and encouragement have made this process joyful and enriching. As well, I would like to thank the artists who agreed to let me use their work and the author/researchers whom much of this research is indebted to.

***For Mr. Sizzles***

## Chapter One: Introduction

While some see contemporary transgressive taboo arts' purpose is to commit cultural irreverence, its aim is to create "disorienting dilemmas" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 4) that force viewers to ask themselves difficult questions and re-evaluate long standing illusions. At its best, it opens dialogue in which viewers engage in critical reflection, shedding light on personal and socio-cultural constructs that largely go unchallenged. But some, including the media, see this form of art as a means to exonerate artists for acts of violence and debasement or as a means for artists to explore their own disturbed fantasies (Cashell, 2009, p. 3). While some shake their heads at the newest artistic outrage, others may be intrigued by artistic provocation and regard it with a spirit of inquiry. It is through these openings that transgressive taboo art is able to widen frames of reference by offering the viewer an artistically constructed disruption that has the power to realign subjectivities. It is this vibrant interactive and interpretive process between viewers and transgressive taboo art that is the subject of this research. Specifically, this research will examine those circumstances that enable viewers to access the pedagogic aspects of transgressive taboo art and those circumstances that stymie pedagogic interplay. It is hoped that new insights into the meaning making process of transgressive taboo art will shed light on how its pedagogy can be optimized within an educational setting.

## The Emergence of Transgressive Art

Throughout the past several hundred years, visual art that has transgressed cultural precepts has expanded the breadth and capacity of artistic commentary (Cashell, 2009, p.1). While



critics and art historians have traced transgressive works back to Renaissance, many point to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as the arrival of a distinct level individualism and extremism in artistic practices that inspired the avant-garde theology of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Walker, p.1, 1999). These 19<sup>th</sup> century artists began to establish the principal “axioms of avant-gardes in painting, inasmuch as they devoted themselves to making an allusion to the unrepresentable” (Lyotard, 1979, p.78). With such works such as *Olympia* (see figure 1), Edouard Manet simultaneously scandalized audiences and transgressed art world mores by depicting a naked prostitute looking back at the viewer “openly and frankly” (Peacock, 1984, p. 11). Such a bold departure from characteristic nude nymphs or goddesses of the time, *Olympia* exposed a “vice that was proper to conceal” (Neret, 2003, p.21). Peter Bürger noted this transfiguration in his 1987 book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, by stating that the emergence of the avant-garde signified an artistic movement whose first priority was not to communicate with one’s audience with commonly understood language. Rather, its priority was to “break through aesthetic

immanence and ...usher in a change in the recipient's praxis" (p 18). Indeed, many 19<sup>th</sup> Century artists moved away from accepted and expected artistic practices to further explore departures from traditional methods and content. This trend continued to evolve, as the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century brought several new artistic genres such as purism and fauvism, each claiming to refresh and renew artistic objectives and techniques. During the First World War Dadaism emerged, not as another movement or genre, but as an "anti-movement which opposed not only all the academicisms, but also the avant-garde schools which claimed to release art from the limits which confined it" (Alexandrian, 1970, p.29). Since that time, artistic transgressions have taken many elaborate and interwoven paths. One such path includes the Surrealists satirical experimentation with natural, found and mass produced objects (Alexandrian, 1970, p.140-141) that continues to challenge parameters of method and content. Other transgressions include art that expresses a political standpoint. Such art is often provocative in that it questions dominant ideologies while simultaneously offering oppositional pressure favoring those who are marginalized (Kershaw, 1992, p.73). Artistic acts that oppose conventional political thinking can and do draw public and critical outrage. For example, Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1979) had a strong pro-feminist sentiment. Her critics however, reproached her choice to represent 38 mythological and historical women, each with an image of a stylised vulva on a dinner plate, as "relying on shock rather than artistic aptitude to get a rise out of her audience" (Lind & Brzuzy, 2008, p.184). Another branch of transgressive art includes what Julius (2002) describes as art that transgresses socio-cultural taboos (p.22). This sub-genre of transgressive art (referred to from this point forward as transgressive taboo art) often

troubles the realms of the sacred and the profane, exposing viewers to concepts that call unchallenged cultural values into question. Although problematizing the comfortable and familiar has the potential to return viewers more cognisant of the fragile foundation that many of their beliefs rest upon, it does so at an emotional cost (Julius, 2002, p. 33-34). This price that viewers pay corresponds directly with their contentment with and acceptance of the shared norms and values being challenged. Because transgressive taboo art deliberately extracts, disrupts and unsettles viewers while also offering them a widened perspective, interaction with this art genre can have a wide range of reactions and responses. Why some viewers are able to gain transformative insight while others are unwilling or unable to engage with particular pieces will be examined in-depth by this research.

### **Transgressive Taboo Art**

The critical reflection inspired by *any* experience that forces people out of the familiar and asks them to consider the erasure or rupture of a construct or boundary has the potential to contribute to understanding and knowledge. Transgressive taboo artists tap into this potentially transformative exchange by creating artistic dilemmas that “interrogate conservative views and subvert conventional moral beliefs” (Cashell, 2009, p.1). This art may take various forms. Transgressive taboo artwork may, for example, call into question institutions thought to embody morality and goodness, tempt repressed instincts and impulses, and/or expose the human propensity of irrationality. It may also force unusual or unexpected associations upon us, highlight our reliance on custom and tradition, and/or question the foundations of commonly held

socio-cultural values regarding such topics as death, sex, bodily fluids and/or excrement, national loyalty, and religion. Very often viewers find these artworks permeated with distressing components and/or unsettling concepts. Advocates argue that this characteristic of disturbance is not only necessary to garner sufficient attention, but also vital to transgressive taboo's pedagogic process. Commonly held hegemonic beliefs bind us tightly. For art to rupture this unbroken surface and cause us to question fundamental aspects of our humanity, it must jar us out of our complacency and drag us to the threshold of doubt and consternation. This discomfort is the price viewers pay to gain a deeper understanding of morality (Julius, 2002, p. 33). When broached adeptly by transgressive taboo artists, moralities are not preached about in a lesson or presented from a fixed political position, but rather are simply open-ended questions that invite viewers into epistemic discourse.

While transgressive taboo art has the potential to free the viewer from longstanding illusions, its reliance on discomfort and its habit of breaching familiar tropes and cherished constructs can lead some viewers to dismiss transgressive art as morally and artistically questionable. Certainly this dramatic interplay is no more clearly realized than the relationship between transgressive taboo art, transgressive taboo artists and the popular media. In a typical response to the transgressive taboo piece *Misadventures of the Romantic Cannibals*, Fox News journalist Diane Mecado (2010) reported that "Critics have said the piece is appallingly disrespectful" referring to the 12 piece lithograph with one panel depicting Christ in a sexual act. But as protesters gathered, viewership soared, increasing almost ten-fold in the wake of the negative publicity. One must ask, did this piece, which violated the sacred with blasphemy,

return viewers to the world with an altered perspective? Did the majority of viewers attend the exhibition simply to confirm the existence of an art-crime? Or did the majority attend out of grim curiosity, and find themselves perhaps to their surprise, able to draw meaning from the work? Were they able to piece together something similar to the artist Enrique Chagoya's intent, which was to "critique the church's position against same sex marriages while all along pedophiles continued to exist within its ranks for decades" (Macedo, 2010)? Or did they construct a variation, perhaps a construction based on their own related experiences and understandings? Though it is not surprising that *Misadventures of the Romantic Cannibals* would generate conflicts of value and general unease among many viewers, consistently negative press suggests that the members of the media tend to highlight opinions that support artistic controversy that in turn underscores the pathology of the artist and overlooks the pedagogy of the art. As well, by shining a spotlight on those few who are outraged, the media forsakes those who are willing to draw order from chaos, find meaning in the enigmatic, and morality in the disturbing, leaving them out of public discourse.

### **Personal Experience as Artist and Educator**

Over the last eight years, I have created three major artistic series that feature human bones, taxidermy animal mounts, and animal skeletons. For five weeks in 2005, I volunteered to look after a gallery that was featuring a solo exhibition of my work in a shopping centre that housed a popular movie theatre. This experience allowed me to listen in on the conversations of a wide range of movie goers as they engaged with my art, not knowing that I was the artist. While many felt my work was ethically

questionable and/or made them physically and emotionally uncomfortable, the vast majority also approached it with curiosity and openness. Quite often, viewers sought to engage me (as a presumed gallery employee) in conversations that expressed their desire to find meaning, despite their aesthetic hesitations or intuitive reactions. The intensity of speculations led me to contemplate how my choice of media was able to harness the power of transgressive taboo art. By using real human and animal remains rather than replicas, viewers were far more compelled to engage in discourse regardless of their final rejection or acceptance of the artwork. In this way, the artwork acted as a catalyst that appeared to push and pull the viewers both in the direction of the art and in the direction of their values, resulting in viewers oscillating between responding to the works' aesthetic value and responding to the works' ethical and emotional reverberations. Interacting with these viewers made me wonder if viewers pass through unique stages of analysis when viewing art that makes them feel uncomfortable. As well, I began to ask why were so many viewers so willing to engage when everyone around me assumed that my work shown in this publicly accessible gallery space would be met with a barrage of viewer outrage and protest. It appeared that the ways in which general public viewers responded to my work was far more multifarious and complex than I had expected. These speculations sowed the seeds of inquiry that have inspired this research.

Over these same eight years, I have also worked as an educator in the public school system. From this vantage point I have experienced the hesitation, misunderstanding, and the disengagement that the education system has with any creative expression that interrogates and examines taboo subject matter. In many

ways, the education system's instinct to shelter and control make it a perfect adversary to the chaos and cultural agitation of the transgressive taboo art world. Many may fear that exposure to such art may corrupt young minds (Lankford & Pankratz, 1992, p. 20). These unwarranted charges are perhaps based on the trepidation that transgressive taboo art may breach the homogeneous coherence that is necessary for a decent and proper society (Zembylas, 2004, p.3). Such charges are based, in my opinion, on an unworkable sense of idealism. But why include transgressive taboo art as part of visual arts curricula? In the next section, I will discuss the advantages of incorporating transgressive taboo art within an educational setting, as well as difficulties that those who attempt its inclusion may face.

### **Transgressive Taboo Art in an Educational Context**

Whilst the popular media may work to alienate the general public from transgressive taboo art, the upper secondary and post-secondary education system is faced with its own unique challenges when exposing students to art that challenges established cultural practices and principles. Rather than expose students to transgressive works that explore taboo subjects such as sex, death, and religion, it is my experience that educators choose to explore safer forms of transgressive art, such as "art that plays with art's own rules" (Julius, 2003, p. 102). This subgenre includes art that challenges rules associated with elements and principles of design, as well as artistic craft, content and subject matter, including the famed 'readymade' objects of Duchamp. Educators will also explore politically resistant art which explores anti-imperial sentiments. The advantages of this are two-fold. On one hand, politically

themed art can enlighten students to non-main stream political perspectives, serving as a gateway to dialogue on social justice. In addition, it also serves as a potent lesson on the manipulative power of art that could be seen from the other perspective, as propaganda. Transgressive taboo art however is far less welcome in classrooms, as the potential to offend is ever present. This 'planned ignoring' may resonate beyond the classroom, reinforcing the fracture that separates the general public from the contemporary art world, catching both sides in an unfortunate state of misunderstanding and deleterious presumptions. While there is significant risk to offending students, parents, and administration, the benefits of exploring well-chosen transgressive taboo art at the upper secondary and post-secondary levels are significant. Inclusion could help transform art education that is safe, routine, and therapeutic to one that is perturbing, challenging and rich enough to invite students to dialogue with and about art. As well, by asking students to suspend cultural 'givens' in favour of inquiry, art based dialogue may also provides opportunities for students to expand perspectives and engage in critical thinking. Not just the type of critical thinking involved in "scrutinizing arguments for assertions unsupported by empirical evidence" (Brooksfield, 1987, p.13) but more specifically critical thinking that functions "...to guide action, to give coherence to the unfamiliar, and to reassess the justification of what is already known" (Mezirow, 1990, p xvi).

Certainly the potential for transgressive taboo art to trigger critical reflection and meaningful discourse exists, but how best to present this contentious genre is wrought with complexities. As there is little to no supporting research on how viewers make sense of art that transgresses personal and socio-cultural values, I looked to prior

research that has examined the interpretation of non-transgressive art. From there, it was possible to build upon and extend what prior researchers have found, in order to formulate research questions about what is unknown. The following section briefly summarizes a small sampling of research on viewer interpretation, followed by principal questions addressed by this research study.

### **Prior Research as a Launching Point for Further Research**

Art has always been a powerful means of communication. When viewers evocatively engage with art, they construct meaning by bridging the visual to the verbal by deciphering layers of expression within the piece. The ways in which “one interprets these layers of meaning depends on preconceptions and acceptance of, or resistance to certain ideas or ideologies that the work reveals” (Yokely, 1999, p. 20). This interactive process of interpretation has been the subject of many significant studies. In particular, past research has focused on how viewers draw conclusions and give meaning to work typically found in museums and galleries. Bruder and Ucok (2000) studied viewer response to paintings in an exhibit at the University of Texas at Austin, which consisted of 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Art and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Art of the American West (p. 340). Their findings indicate viewers construct meaning by accessing memories, real world connections and creative narrations as they analyse the artworks’ visual elements. Franklin, Becklen and Doyle (1993) used the works of Monet and Gorky to reveal that viewers utilize paintings’ titles to construct meaning the majority of the time. Parsons (1987) gathered data from children, youth, and academics to stratify cognitive development of interpretation using the 1929-30 Albright painting, *Into the*

*World There Came a Soul Called Ida*. He found viewers vary in interpretive approaches from literal/narrow to philosophical/vast, depending on age, intellectual development, and education. While these researchers' art choices are varied, none were, in the contemporary sense, transgressive.

Although the abovementioned research has shed light on how viewers make sense of art that has traditional form and content, little is known about how viewers engage with artworks that questions, problematizes or breaches commonly (and currently) held socio-cultural values and/or personal beliefs. Therefore, this research will seek to answer the following research questions.

1. As transgressive taboo art endeavors to initiate dialogue and widen perspectives while intentionally causing distress and/or anxiety in its viewers, under what circumstances is this aim actualized and under what circumstances does this aim fail?
2. What approaches or stages do viewers pass through or employ as they formulate theories of understanding in regards to transgressive taboo artwork and can the paths these processes take be predicted by viewers' art preferences and expectations?
3. Can a deeper understanding of how viewers make sense (or fail to make sense) of transgressive art inform educators who wish to expose their students to transgressive taboo art by providing insight gleaned from how novice viewers meaningfully access and interpret transgressive taboo works of art?

These driving research questions led to the research design of this study. By soliciting novice art viewers and guiding them through an interpretive process as they viewed transgressive taboo works of art that they had never seen before, I was able to capture patterns of engagement as they participated in (or resisted) discursive dialogue that explored possible meanings and connections. It is through the sincere and generous contributions of these participants, as well as the significant insights of author/researchers outlined in Chapter Two and referenced throughout this paper, that I was able to adjust and extend these problem questions to formulate a theory of interpretation of transgressive taboo art. From these new understandings, I was able to formulate recommendations that may help guide educators and students who chose to explore this dynamic genre.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

While there has been no shortage of popular media decrying charges of obscenity and depravity of artwork that tests the limits of tolerance, academic literature has continued to explore such work from an intellectual, historical, and pedagogic perspective. The following selection of literature has been invaluable in providing a theoretical foothold upon which to begin a critical examination and informed discourse on the ideology, the interpretation and the pedagogic potential of transgressive taboo art.

In an effort to not only defend but engage in theoretical discourse on transgressive artwork, British intellect Anthony Julius' 2003 book *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* offers an in-depth examination that offers a structure and vocabulary upon which transgressive art, defined as "art that exceeds the bounds of ordinary goodness" (p. 102), can be further explored. To align this large body of work, Julius loosely divides transgressive art into three sub-genres. The first is art that breaks or "plays with arts' rules" (p 106). This subgenre is characterized by art that challenges the notions of what art is and how it is constructed. The second is described as politically resistant art; art that seeks to expose and offend hegemonic power structures, and is intimately "tied to the politics of the maker (artist)" (p. 112). This art typically forces the viewer to make a choice, often by asking them to position themselves for or against the work's central message (p. 113). Lastly, Julius outlines the qualities of taboo art; art that breaks or highlights cultural taboos typically by reframing given truths as sentimental notions based in tradition (p. 34). His work here is significant, as he draws several unifying

commonalities to artwork that upon first glance appears vast and disjointed. Taboo artist's intent is to expose that some culturally sanctioned mores are worthy of critical reappraisal, and does so by creating artistic constructs that demand the answers to difficult questions. This is often done by troubling unchallenged assumptions about such topics as birth, sex, bodily functions and death, revealing the thin foundation that many unspoken values rest upon. This in turn, provokes an emotional response from the viewer, creating a cost-benefit exchange which offers the viewer freedom from sentimental customs and rituals from the past (p. 146), but does so by unsettling the viewer by employing the power of an uncomfortable viewing experience. These qualities of distress and disturbance make taboo art the most contentious of the transgressive sub-genres.

*Transgressions: Offences of Art* also offers the reader a method to evaluate the conceptual strength of transgressive art by summarizing its common defences. The first is the canonic defence, in which the artwork in question is placed within a historical context. For this, Julius uses the example of the Chapman Brothers 1994 sculpture of a dismembered body impaled on a tree which transformed Goya's 1810-12 print *Great Deeds Against the Dead* into a life sized tableaux. To find this sculpture offensive, the argument would state, one must also find Goya's work offensive. Therefore by tying an artist's creation and artistic intent to a historically accepted work of art validates its place within the artistic realm. The second defence is based in the elements and principles of design. Such qualities as line, form, colour and composition are seen as principle evaluative qualities, often absurdly ignoring the subject matter or content. This

defence is well evidenced by Janet Kardon who when commenting on Mapplethorpe's homoeroticism and sado-masochistic imagery in his exhibition *A Perfect Moment* wrote, "although his models often are depicted in uncommon sexual acts, the inhabitants of the photographs assume gestures governed by geometry, and they are shown against minimal backgrounds" (Kardon, 1988, p. 10). The last is the defence of estrangement, which Julius posits as having the most potential for an educational exchange (p. 49). As the artist exposes a truth, the viewer undergoes disorientation essential for a transformative experience. The presence of dismay, discomfort, and/or psychological pain is crucial elements to create a milieu conducive to breach and reorientation. Julius notes that initial reaction of the viewer is to resist and recoil, but to engage in a pedagogic connection he/she must return. At this point, the viewer may evaluate the art as enlightening, justifying the artistic methods, or insignificant, impugning the artistic methods. Specific ways in which viewers might access this pedagogic exchange is not explained by Julius, just that the viewer must look past the darkness to gain the light.

The introductory chapters of John Walkers book *Art and Outrage* (1999) explore the potent questions that Julius concludes with: is it still possible to shock, and if so what are the individual, social, and political outcomes of this approach to art? He begins, as Julius did, with a short history of avant-garde artists of early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, a group that includes Dadaists, Futurists and Surrealists, whose art was a call to revolt and reform. Since that time, the art world has grown increasingly esoteric and abstruse, often alienating those not educated specifically in the arts. This division has lead to the general public (who Walker outlines as the majority of people who have little knowledge

of art) growing contemptuous of art that they do not understand. While the viewers' visceral reaction may often be negative to transgressive art, it may also intrigue, as people can be both disturbed by and drawn to sex and violence, ugliness and deformity. This desire to experience the exotic thrill of the repressed impulses may lead many to flock to transgressive pieces as a safe way to indulge themselves (p. 18 - 19). He supports this proposition by referencing Morse Peckham's 1965 behavioural work stating that this type of indulgence has the potential to be therapeutic in nature. To ensure a cathartic experience is not the case, Walker points his finger at the popular media for promoting an agenda of instigated outrage. While some writers act as advocates elucidating the works in question, the majority express bewilderment and disdain in tabloid and newspaper articles that have had the deleterious effect of instigating acts of aggression and iconoclasm (p 11-16). Tensions are also experienced by transgressive artists who suffer from a paradox of their own making; while they loathe being misunderstood by the media, they also crave and need media exposure to promote their work and to communicate with their viewers. By detailing this cultural contretemps, *Art and Outrage* ardently demonstrates the systematic disconnect between the general public and the art world, often at the hands of the popular media.

Immediately following the introductory chapter, *Art and Outrage* begins a survey of contemporary transgressive artists based primarily in the United Kingdom. Each segment includes a short narrative summarising the artists' backgrounds, the works in question, and the subsequent media and reported viewer response. Each "reception history" (p. 20) highlights an area of conflict, often between the artist and the general

public, followed by Walker's interpretation of social and psychological consequences. While often taking the artists' statements of intent as valid and worthy, Walker does not shy away from vilifying particular artists, such as Damien Hirst, for having a weak underlying premise. With this approach, he urges all viewers to partake in a serious engagement with art before dismissing it out of hand or branding it as brilliant. Although Walker does not attempt to stratify transgressive art within subgenres or methods of justification of his own making, distinct approaches falling under Julius' framework are revealed within his in-depth examinations. *Art and Outrage* is particularly valuable when examining politically resistant and taboo art as it expands on artist's narratives by giving extensive quotes and reflections that help the reader not only grasp the artist's motivation but the difficulties viewers have faced exploring the pedagogical potential (quality aside) of various in/famous works.

As demonstrated by Walker's book *Art and Outrage*, a common charge against transgressive art is that of immorality and desecration. To explore possible answers to this charge is clinical psychologist Stephanie Dudek's (1993) article "The Morality of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Transgressive Art"; an article strongly in favour of art that seeks to liberate the viewer from tradition in order to further personal growth. She begins her argument describing art's capacity to compel change and inspire a new vocabularies and realities (p. 145-147). Like Julius (2002), Dudek posits that transgressive art is a symptom born of cultural complacency and shocks viewers because they have grown indifferent and unwilling to critically examine their values. To effect change and reverse the effects of this dehumanizing apathy, transgressive art demands uncomfortable forms and formats

(p.147). Throughout this piece, Dudek regards art that triggers meaningful discourse on truth and reality as highly moral, however near the end she goes a step further by condemning that which reflects laziness, indifference, and clichéd perceptions as duly immoral (p. 151). Although Dudek's point is well argued, her weakness appears to be her unwavering support of transgressive art, as she does not provide criteria to differentiate between art that is sincerely constructed to generate meaningful dialogue and art that is more flash than substance. She does however offer a strong argument for the intellectual worth of art that pushes the boundaries of cultural tolerance.

In opposition to Dudek's (1993) stance on the intellectual worth of transgressive art is Anna Kindler's (2008) article "Art, Creativity, Art Education, and Civil Society". In this article, Kindler constructs a compelling argument against the inclusion of contemporary art in the education system as its transgressive aspects undermine arts' role and value (and thus its justification) within the curriculum. To begin her argument, Kindler looks to the past when arts' place in society was to "uplift spirit", "support civility", and "promote moral conduct" (p.1); values she believes continue to linger. In stark contrast to these traditional sensitivities and practices lies the contemporary art world (p.3) where art insiders have carved out a place for themselves by constructing arbitrary yardsticks of what art is brilliant, often eluding not just the general public but those who have considerable experience with art (p.6). This coupled with a discernible shift of importance away from the quality of art and towards the artist and his/her intention, places undue pressure upon the artist to be 'creative,' which in the contemporary sense is novelty coupled with shock and offense (p.9). For art education to remain relevant,

many practitioners perceive that it must keep up with the misguided directions of the contemporary art world. In contrast, Kinder believes that the pursuit of a world where artists engage in shocking acts to gain notoriety, may be art education's undoing.

While Kindler does not use the adjective 'transgressive' or 'taboo' when describing art that is to be avoided, she references several artists and artworks that fall within the transgressive taboo definition. One such piece she uses to illustrate works that push the boundaries of respect, dignity, and decency (p.8) is Guillermo Habacus Vargas' 2007 installation *Exposición N° 1*. In it, Vargas tied up an emaciated street dog in a Costa Rican gallery to ask the question, why is it that the public cares when a dog is starving within the confines of a gallery when they do not care about the hundreds of dogs starving on the street in front of the gallery? Like many transgressive taboo artworks, the premise of this work is deeply troubling. Upon deeper reflection however, the question it asks is legitimate, largely due to its geographical context and this community's daily treatment of stray animals. Despite this piece's widespread notoriety, Kindler states that there is "no evidence" that it "actually prompted the desired reflection on human hypocrisy or changed in any way the fate of stray animals in Costa Rica" (p.9). But one must ask, if research data was not gathered, does this mean not a single viewer found this piece transformational? Or is Kindler implying that research was conducted and the results indicate that no dialogue of any meaning transpired? Indeed, she pronounces that work such as this "seldom result(s) in any positive social outcomes" (p.9). While I do feel Kindler argues well for the importance of maintaining traditional art forms within the art curricula, it is also hoped that the research gathered

in this study will provide the evidence that even viewers with little artistic training or background are able to critically reflect upon the questions that transgressive taboo art asks. And, with the right circumstances in place, these reflections can be personally transformative.

To help structure artistic engagement and evaluation is Terry Barrett's (1994) article "Principles for Interpreting Art", a highly comprehensive testament for teaching interpretation as prerequisite to teaching art criticism. In this article, Barrett offers a set of principles for teachers to engage students in interpretive dialogue that "provides criteria for assessing works of art" (p. 8). While each principle offers the reader a strong foundation for interpreting aesthetic works of art, it also addresses common missteps that viewers may take when viewing work that is transgressive in nature. For example, Barrett begins by stating that reasonable interpretations should cast the artwork in "its best rather than weakest light" (p. 8). This spirit of generosity and respect is vital when viewing work that is deliberately confrontational, as it asks the viewer to search first for its pedagogy prior to dismissing it as an act "...of debasement without rationale or purpose" (Cashell, 2009, p. 2). Another apt principle is that interpretation should focus on the art and not the personality of the artist. One can include relevant biographical information as well as how this piece fits into the artist's oeuvre, but prematurely concluding the artist is exploring "...their own traumatic neurosis" (Cashell, 2009, p.2) will stymie insightful critiques. Lastly, Barrett invites the interpreters to meander intellectually with their thoughts, remain open to the intellectual freedom of others, and avoid "dogmatic pronouncements" (p. 13). This final note is critical when viewing

transgressive art, because formulating a perceptive evaluation is typically not an immediate response. While remaining open may be especially challenging when viewing an art piece that is evocative, knowledge of Barrett's principles may lead the viewer to a more likely chance of a transformational shift; a crucial understanding for educators of transgressive taboo art.

To further explore difficulties that arise from interpretation of contemporary art, New Zealand philosopher Denis Dutton's (1987) article "Why Intentionalism Won't Go Away" examines challenging elements of individual relativism, particularly when viewers are unfamiliar with an artist's background or body of work. He begins by positing Wimsatt and Beardsley's (1946/54) highly influential article "Intentional Fallacy" as problematic when viewers are traversing worlds that they are wholly unacquainted with. Dutton states that in order to make sense of something that is unfamiliar, observers move into a hermeneutic circle in which they draw conclusions of the whole based upon their understandings of the parts. Typically, observers develop (or guess at) the meaning of the larger underlying concept by sifting through the evidence (or parts). They then compare the evidence to their hypotheses, adjusting it as needed. Dutton states that a problem arises when viewers step into the wrong hermeneutic circle and construct false hypotheses based on faulty assumptions (p. 4). To illustrate this point, Dutton cites a cultural anthropologist who after viewing the artistic practices of an aboriginal tribe, came to mistaken assertions based on her own cultural-based assumptions. To complicate the magnitude of such errors, many caught in this loop of misaligned reasoning fail to overturn their hypothesis, even when faced with evidence

that directly refutes it (p. 5). While Dutton does not use transgressive art as an illustrative example of this disconnect, one can easily transpose his assertions to the difficulties that may arise when viewers interface with art that transgresses moral and cultural boundaries. As Bhabha (2001) states in the article “The Subjunctive Mood of Art”, typical viewers believe art to be representational; formed from images, metaphors, allegories to represent passions, emotions, and ideas. When art is hung in museums and galleries, typical viewers often believe that the artist will leave them clues to unlock the artwork’s meaning (p. 93-94). In the case of transgressive taboo art, this approach becomes problematic as clues left behind by artists can appear immoral, contradictory, and emotionally disturbing. Without intervention (such as dialogic interaction and/or a platform from which viewers may approach such art), novice viewers may hastily condemn the work as reckless and without merit.

Offering a framework on of how we may engage in discriminating art criticism is outlined in Tom Anderson’s (1993) article “Defining and Structuring Art Criticism for Education”. Anderson begins by defining the act of art criticism as encompassing the overlapping non-linear processes of description, interpretation, and evaluation. During the act of description, viewers recognise and analyse the literal and implied expressive qualities that a work of art possesses (p. 200). Of interest during this section, Anderson distinguishes “deep descriptions” (p. 201) as the moments when a viewer shifts focus away from the artwork and towards themselves, seeing aspects of their lives reflected in the artwork. This, for Anderson, is a signifier of critical reflection, as the viewer moves from the superficial to the substantive. Anderson then describes interpretation

as the process where viewers examine and analyse visual elements in order to weigh possible meanings. This praxis is tied to creativity, general knowledge and life experience as viewers make connections in an effort to 'read' the piece's expressive qualities (p. 202). Lastly, Anderson examines criticism as a series of steps towards evaluation and rational judgement. While Anderson's three-step process of art criticism is quite apt in regards to this research, several aspects of his practical educational commentary are less suitable in this context. Anderson's emphasis on the educational benefits of formalism as a means to help novice viewers access the piece's expressive sense is, while not without relevance, less pertinent to unlocking the pedagogic potential of transgressive works of art. One area that is fitting however is Anderson's view regarding the timing of viewers' exposure to 'official' interpretations so commonly found on museums placards and in art history text books. Anderson feels such revelations should occur well after viewers have had the opportunity to fully develop and explore their initial responses. This allows them to interact with art and see their interpretations and evaluations as primary, while realigning the official version as supplementary information rather than as the correct answer. This compromise between individual relativism and espoused theory, perhaps in the form of media commentary or artist statements, may well leave viewers of transgressive art with a fuller, more multifarious viewing experience.

To bridge the act of interpretation to transformative learning, Jack Mezirow's (1990) introduction to *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformational Learning* offers an insightful commentary that cites critical

interpretation as a skill necessary to foster higher order learning. Although he makes no mention of visual art as a means to reassess perspectives, his work speaks directly to the potential pedagogic exchange posed by *any* experience that confronts assumptions and beliefs. To begin, Mezirow states that to understand an experience, we must interpret it. When we use this interpretation to guide decision-making, "...making '*meaning*' becomes '*learning*'" (p. 1, emphasis in original). Interpretation therefore is a complex process that involves critical reflection on culturally bound fore-structures such as: habits of expectation, personally held theories and beliefs, as well as the tacit foundations upon which assumptions are constructed. This critical reflection is often difficult. When an experience is too strange or too unsettling, Mezirow notes that many tend to reject the experience or resort to interpretations that serve to defend rather than reframe. This response directly blocks the learning process as it binds critical analysis within constraints of epistemic, socio cultural, and psychic distortions (p.4-5). Mezirow then opines that by experiencing 'catalyst events' that invite critical reflection and question prior learning, we are able to construct new understandings via meaningful problem solving. It is through this process of instrumental learning (ways in which we attack a problem) and communicative learning (ways in which we assess other's viewpoints) that we are able to meaningfully interpret an experience. Despite limitations to this imperfect process, Mezirow posits that to reflect upon "...one's own premises can lead to transformational learning" (p. 6) and thus to a paradigm shift. Such catalyst events exist in common life experiences, but artist-created catalysts also exist in the contemporary art world. Though Mezirow writes without reference to art that denies doctrinal values, violates commonly held principles, or disorders conceptual

hierarchies, it is clear that troubling one's perceptions invites the possibility for an educational and thus transformational exchange.

Acting as a parallel framework to what viewers of transgressive taboo art may undergo, Kurt Bruder and Ozum Ucok's (2000) study "Interactive Art Interpretation: How Viewers Make Sense of Painting in Conversation" analysed viewers' verbal expressions and responses as they constructed meaning while viewing paintings found at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. After recording and interviewing fifty-five viewers, three categories of 'art talk' emerged. The first category was evaluation, which included comments of personal preference, reserved or resolved judgements of like or dislike, as well as desire to own (p.341-343). When viewers felt a strong attraction to a particular piece, they would typically stop to further interpret it, leading to the second category of art talk that included viewer comments on colours, subject matter and technique. As well, viewers in this study were often drawn to enigmatic works of art, which lead to verbalizations that signalled "confusion, puzzlement, and astonishment, as well as attraction and fascination" (p.344). In enigmatic paintings where little artist intent was given, viewers would "evoke a conscious effort to infer or assign meaning" (p.345), often in a creative way. If, however the painting's imagery was too abstract and too unrecognizable, viewers would frequently lose interest and walk away. Storytelling in which viewers construct narratives as a means to makes sense of the work, was the third category of art talk. Here Bruder and Ucok note that viewers often used storytelling to organize information in the paintings as a means to "establish conceptual connections among phenomena,

as well as between themselves and objects in their worlds” (p. 347). In this way, viewers would make connections between known and unknown elements (including the painting’s title) and include common reference points from their own lives to piece together a narrative. When striving to interpret enigmatic paintings, viewers who attempted narratives often found the process frustrating, at times ignoring elements that clearly contradicted their stories (p. 348-9), a point reflected by Dutton (1987) in his comments regarding those who step into the wrong hermeneutic circles often do not recognize the discord between the given evidence and the emerging theory. As transgressive art is often enigmatic, misleading, or emotionally provocative, one must ask if viewers of transgressive art would create narratives. And if so would they be, as Bruder and Ucek describe, fantastic stories characterized by extraordinary, unusual or exaggerated content (p. 350) or self-reflective stories characterized by comparing themselves with the artist, the content, or some other feature of the work? With such compelling questions and conceivable parallels, Bruder and Ucek’s work is an invaluable resource as many of its findings serve as a launching point for this inquiry. Because people respond to different paintings, genres and levels of abstraction differently, they may also respond to transgressive art differently and in so doing, construct meaning in a pointedly different way.

Transgressive taboo art has pedagogic potential. However, as Walker (1999) points out, reception histories of transgressive taboo art demonstrate a tradition of outrage and condemnation instigated by the popular media as they create mythologies about transgressive artists and formulate realities about their work, in order to “...set people up as hate figures and construct the narratives they want” (p.195). Such divisive

typecasting has largely alienated transgressive taboo art from the educational realm, leaving novice viewers ill prepared to critically engage with this art form. Some viewers may for example, quickly conclude the art in question is a sharp insult directed at viewers who hold conservative values. Others may disregard the artistic context and presume that the art's content and subject matter are meant to sanction immoral conduct in real world situations. Many more may wish to immediately ease their discomfort by accessing the artist's original intent, prematurely ending personal connections that they may have had through critical reflection and dialogue. This research seeks to not only unpack how viewers personally engage with transgressive taboo art, but also seeks to inform best practice recommendations for how educators may incorporate this genre into their visual arts curriculum. For it is through education that novice viewers can gain access to the otherwise remote avant-garde contemporary art world and perhaps begin to see transgressive taboo art as an aid to introspection that exposes divergent "ways of living and models of action within the existing real" (Bourriaud, 2002, p 13).

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

The purpose of this research to analyze the process of interpretation of novice viewers as they engage with transgressive taboo art by attempting to capture the moments when the art interrupts their presuppositions and new ways of seeing emerge. This research also sought to gather data on circumstances in which viewers are unable or unwilling to question personal and/or socio cultural codes challenged by the artworks in question. By exposing nineteen participants of varying ages, professions and art preferences to three thematically different transgressive taboo artworks, interview data revealed a great deal about the stages and/or approaches that enabled viewers to pedagogically engage with transgressive taboo art and circumstances that circumvented such engagement. Analysis of this data was also able to provide a framework upon which theoretical extensions and educational implications could be drawn.

### **Participants**

Several studies have documented that there is a fundamental difference between the interpretive frameworks of novice viewers and experienced viewers (Cupchik, & Gebotys, 1988; Nodine, Locher, & Krupinski, 1993; Parsons, 1987). As this research hopes to inform educators who work with students who have little experience with transgressive art, participants also reflected a novice perspective. Thus, while the nineteen adult participants solicited to partake in this study all had an expressed interest in art, none were practicing artists nor were engaged in professions related

directly to contemporary visual arts. To elicit a widest variety of viewer-art responses the group of participants were of various ages (19 to 69), professions (music engineer, postal worker, retired firefighter, etc.) and educational backgrounds (high school, technical school, undergraduate, etc.). Not only did this result in an array of artistic expectations and preferences, but also a wide variance in regards to emotional response, interpretive response, and pedagogic actualization.

Several days after receiving details about the study via email, a face-to-face interview was arranged at the location of the participant's choosing. After introductions and a brief synopsis of the interview, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym. Some chose names with personal significance, like Sarge, a publicist in her late thirties, who chose the name of her dog. Others like John, an actor in his early forties, preferred a pseudonym that ensured a high level of anonymity. The majority however, did not disclose the reason behind their often quite specific choice, which often included particular spellings. Participants were then positioned beside the interviewer and in front of a computer screen. A digital voice recorder was also placed in a position that would best capture the interview for later transcription.

For those who were unable to meet face-to-face, the interview was conducted via Skype. Several days after receiving details about the study including documents regarding informed consent, a time was set up at the participant's convenience. Images were shown to participants via 'screen sharing' at the appropriate time during the interview. All other factors remained the same, including the approximate time frame that ranged from 30 to 60 minutes.

## **Interview Process**

Prior to participants viewing the three pieces of artwork, a brief interview gathered information in regards to participants' art related preferences and "habits of expectation" (Mezirow, 1990, p.1). Participants were asked to explain, in their opinion: what art is and isn't, the purpose art has in their lives and the purpose art has in society. Questions also asked participants to describe the art that they are typically drawn to and if there is any subject matter, artist, or genre they favour. The function of this questioning was to establish data used to evaluate if a relationship exists between art expectations and the ability to critically reflect on problem positions put forth by the transgressive taboo art presented. By identifying participants' preformed beliefs about art, I was able to evaluate if these beliefs may orient and propel interpretation, enhance or alter the stages of interpretation and if certain beliefs predispose a level of openness that viewers may hold toward non-traditional, non-aesthetic artistic forms.

Individual viewers were then shown three pieces of contemporary transgressive art projected on a large computer screen. They were provided with the artists' names, titles and years the pieces were made. Participants were not told however, any information regarding the artists' statements, the artists' reported intent, public response, or published criticism, as this information would likely have significant sway on participants' interpretive processes.

Throughout each interpretive proceeding, participants and I engaged in mutually informative dialogue that was taped via a digital recorder for later coding and data analysis. Immediately following the presentation of each piece, viewers were asked to

describe their initial emotional response in order to examine how emotional response impacts the meaning making process. Viewers were then asked to describe what they saw to gather data in regards to the visual elements that activated or facilitated meaning construction. Further open ended questions such as “What do you think this piece could be about?” served to propel the interpretive process as needed. Direct prompts such as “Why do you feel that way?” and “Please tell me more” were also employed as a means of clarifying statements. Several times during the interview, participants were also asked subject/context specific open-ended questions, such as, “Would you be tempted to participate in this installation?” and/or “How would you feel if someone else took action?” in an effort to resist closure and to further engagement and negotiation. Throughout the interviews, I took great care not to coerce participants in any particular direction or speak as an authority from a fixed perspective. Rather, I strove to create an atmosphere where the participant (and I) could “entertain multiple layers of conflicting competing meanings” (Beach, 1993, p.122) so that he/she would be able to freely explore possible perspectives. At the end of each interview, each participant was asked their final opinion of the piece and if they considered it a legitimate work of art. This question served myriad purposes. At times, it indicated a widening or reinforcement of artistic parameters. Other times it indicated an acceptance or rejection of the artwork’s pedagogic elements.

### **The Artwork**

Each art piece chosen for this research falls under the definition of Anthony Julius’ (2000) definition of taboo art, which is art that agitates, troubles, or highlights tacit

socio-cultural practices and beliefs (p. 134). Such art attempts to trigger critical reflection in the viewer by examining suppressed and repressed personal and social issues; often drawing on the power of discomfort to construct a disorienting dilemma that may or may not spark transformative reflection. The artwork chosen for this research was selected based on several criteria including such factors as artist sincerity, emotional impact and pedagogic potential. In addition, although presenting very different problem positions, each of the pieces call upon the viewer to consider that commonly held perceptions of morality are incomplete constructs and as such require critical discourse. By momentarily suspending moral restrictions, viewers may then be free to interrogate “the limits of knowledge, the certainty of knowledge, and the criteria for knowing” (Kitchener, 1983, p.230). Without this suspension, transgressive taboo art often appears to be unprincipled and malevolent. Thus these pieces also challenge viewers to find meaning beyond reactionary condemnation.

It should also be noted that these three pieces were also chosen, not only for the epistemic challenges presented, but because I anticipated that the novice viewer participants would not have seen or heard of them. Therefore, the artwork chosen is well known among certain artistic and localized circles, but not commonly so. Fortunately this proved to be the case, as no participant mentioned that they had seen or heard of the selected artwork during the interviews, allowing them to respond and interpret in a subjective, first-hand way, without residual influence from media reports or public opinion.

## Piece #1 Fox Face Platter

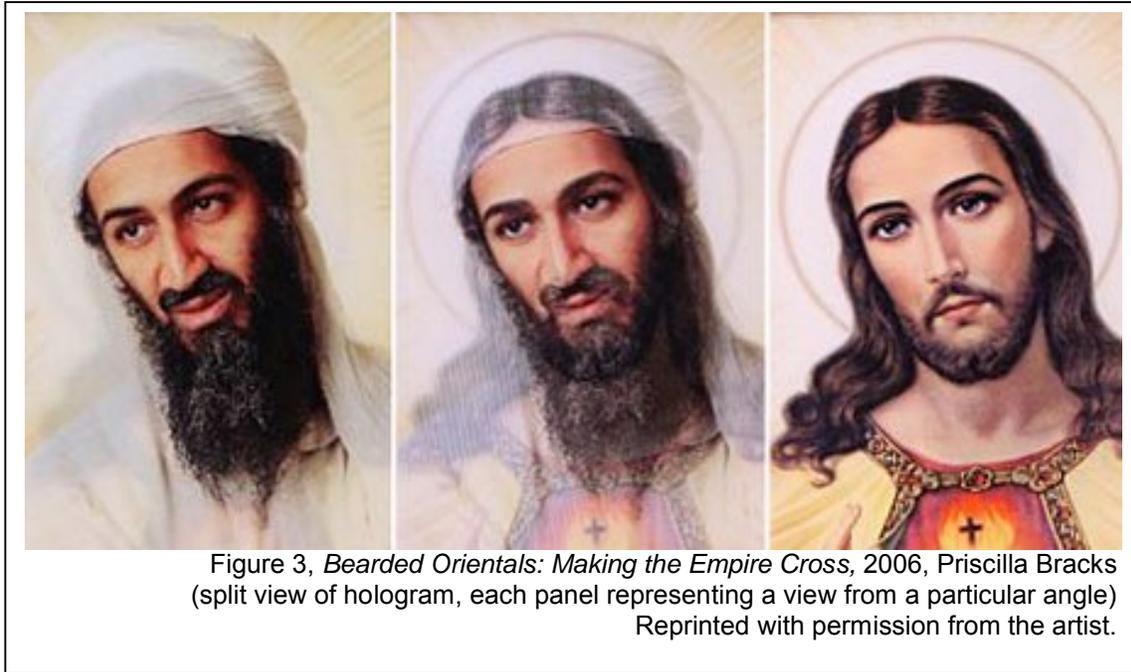


Figure 2, *Fox Face Platter*, 2006, Scott a.a. Bibus, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

Bibus is a member of the Minnesota Association of Rogue Taxidermists, an association that has a 'no kill' code of ethics. The piece *Fox Face Platter* is a reflection of this credo, as it casts light on our absurdly hypocritical relationship we have with dead animals. This sculpture is a cup and saucer with a partial fragment of a taxidermy fox mask with one eye peering upward. Inside the cup are grapes floating in a thick red liquid. Red smeared grapes are also placed alongside the cup, as though prepared for a small meal. In an artist interview by Thomas McIntyre (2009), Bibus stated that *Fox Face Platter* as a statement regarding contradictions he sees in the American way of life, which include analogous to the ways Americans cope with death. This piece was chosen as it offers several articles (cup, saucer, grapes, partial animal face, red liquid)

that participants may utilize as clues upon which they build their meaning making. This piece is most like traditional art in the way that viewers may interpret by searching for symbolic meaning as they weigh factors of form and content.

### **Piece #2 Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross**



This art piece openly questions doctrinal suppositions of good and evil as defined by 21<sup>st</sup> century Western history. In *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross*, Bracks juxtaposes the images of Jesus Christ and Osama Bin Laden in a lenticular hologram print that shifts from one face to the other when viewed from different angles. The artist's intent is not one of equating the two historical figures, but rather as a means to open purposeful discourse on "relationships between media, popular culture, and the development of truth, history and ideology" (Bracks, 2007). While Bracks sees Jesus' place in history is clearly defined, this piece contemplates how Bin Laden will be portrayed, as either incarnate of evil or religious martyr. Joining such powerful symbols

as art has the potential to evoke a number of interpretations based on the strength of viewers' enculturation in several realms including their willingness to question absolutes that are proselytized in western culture.

### Piece #3 Helena



This installation openly exposes and challenges viewers' repressed instincts of cruelty and voyeurism. In 2000, at Denmark's Trapholt Museum, Evaristti installed ten electric blenders, each filled with fresh water and a live goldfish. The blenders stood by, visibly plugged into outlets, enticing viewers to participate in the installation by liquefying a fish. A strong example of troubling work, this installation put temptation in the way of the visitor, challenging his/her ethics and morals. Once they press the button, the moral responsibility belonged to the participant, offering them the opportunity to publicly give evidence of their "...true colours" (Hofbauer, 2007). This

piece is a highly provocative example of transgressive art, as it casts viewers in the roles of voyeur, sadist or moralist. While the goldfish would suffer an instantaneous fate, many viewers may feel deeply troubled by what this piece may reveal about themselves and other attendees. This complexity, along with its clear attempt at maddening cultural mores, makes this an ideal selection for this research.

## **Hiatus**

As noted by Jack Mezirow (1990) when given a hiatus, people often reassess perspectives and possibly alter them upon reflection (p. 5). To allow for this hiatus, participants were contacted two to five days after the face-to-face interview to express any additional insights they may have upon reflection. During this time, they were explicitly asked to refrain from researching the pieces on the internet, as both *Helena* and *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* have been vilified by the popular media. It is felt these publicized responses may significantly impact participants' processes of critical reflection. Discussion between participants was tolerated for those who knew other participants, as it would be supported by Barrett's principle that clearer interpretations are often forged communally.

## **Limitations**

Several limitations to this study are worth noting. The relatively small size of participants calls into question the translatability of the findings due to the scope and breadth of possible responses. As well, 18 of 19 participants were over the age of 25, giving them a large advantage in regards to political, experiential, allegorical, and

general world knowledge that younger viewers of transgressive taboo art may not possess. Such life experience likely informed the meaning making process, as well as contributed to notions about artists and the art world. While I feel the age range of the participants and their subsequent responses concur with average viewers, these responses may not be as applicable to the young adults who are typically found in the upper secondary and post-secondary education systems.

Another limitation pertains to the visual presentation of the works being explored. Due to several logistic considerations, the artwork was displayed on a large computer screen rather than its original gallery context. This could have resulted in a significant dampening effect on each of the three pieces. *Fox Face Platter* was presented as a photograph of a sculpture, regrettably removing the viewer's ability to examine it from various angles and distances. *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* is a lenticular hologram, a format that is impossible to replicate on a computer screen. To compensate for this, prior to viewing this piece the researcher presented a hand held example of a lenticular hologram to demonstrate the overlapping effect and the need to show the art in three separate panels as one would see from the front, the left, and the right. This necessary dissection of the piece removed an element of discovery and surprise that many viewers may have felt when encountering it in a gallery. Additionally, when participants were presented with photographs of the installation *Helena*, they had to rely heavily on their imagination to picture themselves in front of it, surrounded by other viewers in order to truly explore their own reactions and possible meanings. Fortunately, the concept of *Helena* was powerful enough to evoke very strong responses, and thus the majority of participants were motivated to explore possible

meanings. Thus, despite the contrived nature of seeing transgressive artworks on a computer screen, the data gathered is felt to be genuine, albeit less emotionally charged than it would have been if the participants were able to see the pieces in real life.

While there are several limitations to claiming definitive results due to the relatively small sample size and the contrived context in which viewers were asked to view artwork, it is felt that this study did provide a great deal of useful information on how participants made sense of transgressive taboo art. The research undertaken in this thesis was able to identify theories of interpretation inductively by systematically analysing data gathered from participants during interviews, as participants revealed several patterns and regularities in the meaning making process. It should also be noted, that data analysis was subjected to “theoretical sensitivity” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.41), as this inquiry reflected an awareness of subtle connections and relevancies gleaned from my experience and expertise as both a viewer of transgressive taboo art and as a transgressive taboo artist.

## **Coding**

As anticipated, during the phases of data acquisition, transcription of participant interviews and data analysis, theory construction occurred in a linear and a non-linear fashion. To follow the methodology of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) the data collection began with open coding, as preliminary categories and sub-categories were identified based on each participant’s transcribed interview. Through line-by-line analysis I was able to identify and name distinct chunks of data, such as labelling each

participant's art preferences by genre, subject matter or mood. This led to axial coding as I was able to identify relationships between categories and subcategories. For example, axial coding helped to expose and identify relationships between such factors as viewers' initial emotional response and their in/ability to draw meaning from the art in question. Selective coding was then used to compare larger overarching relations in order to construct the "research story" (Gray, 2004, p.336) of how viewers make sense of transgressive taboo art. It is here that the data allowed me to speculate on the influence of such factors as participants' self-position and pursuit of artist message upon the interpretive process. It is through these connections that the identification influential factors and relationships that a theory of transgressive taboo art interpretation emerged.

To begin, the interview results stratified participants into loosely formed groups of differing art expectations. As anticipated, most viewers emphasised arts' role in their lives as distinctly different that the role art has in society. Also as anticipated, these roles were also in keeping with participants' definitions of what art is and isn't, as well as the types of art that participants prefer.

At the immediate outset of viewing each piece of transgressive art, participants' emotional responses were codified under the following categories: Strong negative response which included: anger, shock, a powerful sense of wrongness, and hostility towards the art/artist, anxiety and disgust. Strong positive response which included: intrigue, excitement, humour, and included comments like "this makes a lot of sense to me" or "I really like it," and mildly negative/positive which included mild curiosity or

interest, or indications of apathy. Several participants also felt simultaneous strong negative and strong positive responses for some pieces, indicated by such comments as, “I feel both excited and horrified at the same time.”

After a brief description, participants were asked to engage in interpretation as they began the complex process of finding meaning. At this point, coding emerged as patterns were revealed. Pre-formulated category systems were avoided to reduce distorting data features. Several distinct patterns emerged during the interpretive process revealing distinct stages and/or approaches to transgressive taboo art including: judgements relating to like and dislike, speculation on artist’s intent, the search for metaphor, the construction inter and intra personal theories of meaning, as well as title use (or non-use) and commentary on colour and composition. Other overarching trends also became apparent when examining transcribed interviews include such findings as the impact of art expectations on the interpretive process, participants’ tendencies to make self-positioning statements and inferences, as well as the significance of dialogic participation. Due to the variety of participants and their stages and/or approaches to the artwork presented, a sizable amount of data was gathered regarding characteristics and conditions that enhance or impede the meaning making process.

Through this dissemination process, I was able to identify and speculate on parallel and nonparallel ways in which viewers approach transgressive taboo and non-transgressive art in general. As well, careful examination of transcribed participants’ interviews exposed critical turning points derived through discourse. In particular, shifts

in judgement and perception were revealed as participants began their encounter with the pieces presented from a negative/closed position and through open-ended dialogue ended their encounter with an altered/open perspective. Transformative exchanges such as this may shed light on potential strategies that may be of critical importance in an educational setting. The data also revealed information regarding participants who either refused to engage in open dialogue or who engaged in dialogue but refused to critically weigh the validity of personal or social-cultural beliefs. As revealed by the data in the following sections, not only does transgressive art seek to inspire discourse and critical reflection; it requires it to be understood.

## Chapter Four: Interview Data

### Part One of Interview– Habits of Artistic Expectation

To better understand the 19 participants frame of reference for artistic interpretation, prior to being shown the three transgressive works of art, participants were asked to describe the art they were particularly drawn to, what role art plays in their lives, what role art plays in society, and in their opinion, what is and isn't art. This information proved to be valuable when answering questions regarding the role of artistic expectation and preference on the meaning making process, as it shed light on the fore-structures which participants built their understanding for each piece. It also helped to clarify assumptions regarding participants who were unable or unwilling to engage with particular pieces, leading them to reject them outright as not viable works of art.

**Participants' Artistic Preferences.** At the beginning of each interview, individual participants were asked to describe the type of artwork that they were drawn to. In response to this open-ended question, participants cited a variety of media, genres, artists, content, themes, as well as styles or temperaments they favoured. Several participants began by citing preferred media, which included photography, sculpture, as well as oil and watercolour paintings. Genres that were referred to spanned from realism, impressionism, art nouveau, pop art, to folk and primitive art. Several participants named a favourite artist when speaking of artistic preferences, which ranged considerably from the Robert Bateman and Nan Golden to Hieronymus Bosch and Mark Ryden. A number of participants also commented on subject matter that they

are drawn to. Many identified the content found in landscapes, cityscapes and scenes of water and nature appealed to them both aesthetically and spiritually, as these scenes serve to transport them to another space and time. Other participants had highly developed thematic preferences, in that they had a well formed specific attraction for particular content that served a philosophical and psychological interest. An example of this was Vanna, a journalist in her early thirties, who was drawn to art that explores girlhood, the coming of age, and womanhood. Participants also made descriptive comments regarding styles or temperaments that they preferred. While some are drawn to art that was dark, raw, ironic, edgy, and unusual, others cited beauty, warmth, nostalgia, naivety, and tranquility as the principal traits that they prefer.

**Roles Art Plays in Participants' Lives.** When asked how about the role art plays in participants' lives in an ongoing and personal level, these responses not surprisingly were strongly allied with their art preferences. For those who preferred landscapes, cityscapes, water scenes, and nature they saw art's role in their lives as one to evoke memories, calm, transport and escape. Gerome, a computer technologist in his twenties, stated that, "We have a few paintings that have water, so looking at them feels like we are looking out at the water. It expands my world a bit." Also seeing art as a means of escape, Daisy, a culinary blogger in her mid-thirties, stated, "Art gives me a moment to stop my everyday routine, to look at something else, to ponder." Alternate emotional payoffs were mentioned by Francesca, a nurse in her mid-thirties, who prefers art that is "a bit shocking, steeped in irony". She spoke of her favourite painting *Happiness* by Glenn Barr, as a source of comfort despite its dark and desperate content stating, "The painting *Happiness* is all about sadness and depression. I like the

irony of it, but I know my life is better. It makes me feel better, makes me look at myself, look inward.” Like Francesca, several other participants felt art was a catalyst for reflection. John stated that, “My love of art can come from a very selfish spot. I ask, how does this art reflect upon my world?” Similarly, Tsorf, a musician in his thirties, sought and found new understanding in art, stating, “Art can provide me a way to find an answer. It can provide clues to what I seek, and I guess, sometimes closure.” Several participants also stated art forced them to think outside of their area of comfort and in this way challenged them intellectually. Maria, a charity worker in her mid-twenties, stated, “The type of intellectual stimulation that happens when I look at art doesn’t happen when I look at other sorts of things.” Interestingly, one participant stated that art serves as a form of rebellion. Vanna, referred to her father, an art educator, who “rejects everything about conceptual and contemporary photography, so that makes it appeal to me.” Lastly, some participants found art to be a form of personal creative expression. Gayle, a hair stylist in her late thirties, referred to art that she chose to hang on her walls as “giving personality to her home” and Sarge stated, “It makes my environment more interesting.”

**Roles Art Plays in Society.** Participants were also asked how, in their opinion, art serves society. In response to this, the majority of participants felt that art was a positive and powerful means of cultural evolution. Several participants cited art’s ability to ask questions, spark dialogue, and transform viewers’ perspectives. John stated, “Art shows us the need to break down our struggles and make sense of them so we can understand them.” Other participants stated that art acts as a cultural and political mirror. Anna, an antique dealer in her early fifties, expanded on this notion by stating,

“Art allows people to see what direction society is going, where society is, and what society is going through.” Others felt that art played a key role in increased broad-mindedness and acceptance. Claire, a stylist in her mid-thirties, felt “art is meant to show people diversity, tolerance, and open people’s minds.” One participant noted art’s power to evoke a sense of community among viewers and as such, unite them stating, “When I observed a committee on public art and they needed to pick things that represented the neighbourhood, I saw art can bring people together”. Contributing an element of aesthetic beauty, imagination and creative inspiration was also noted by a few participants, such as Susie, a clothing designer in her early sixties, who stated, “Art gives people beauty. It allows them to focus on the pleasant and is something that can stimulate the senses in a positive way.” Claire also suggested, “Art can show scenes people would never have imagined, never conceived, like Dali.” One participant had a slightly more cynical view of art’s place in society, perhaps seeing art as primarily serving those who strive for cultural sophistication, stating, “I think it makes people and society feel superior when they take the time to show an interest in art. I don’t really think it serves a purpose other than self-satisfaction.”

**What Art Is.** As there has been considerable debate about what art is and what art isn’t both inside and outside of the art world, the participants were asked to give parameters that they personally felt art lay within. Several participants began their commentary on this topic stating that they feel art is highly subjective and they are not in a position to question what someone else would call a work of art. The majority of these commentators also noted that their opinion of like or dislike has no bearing on a given piece’s ‘artness’. When delving into art’s criteria, the majority of participants

began their discussion of what art is, by referencing the presence and intent of an artist. Lily, a 19 year old student, summed up many participants' overarching views stating, "You need to have an artist before you have art." Repeatedly, participants used words like plan, design, or purpose to describe art's deliberate nature. Many also felt that art reflected directly back onto the artist's beliefs and message, calling it a direct reflection of the artist's mind, as Claire who felt art was tangible evidence "...of someone's mind, the artist's creativity." Others included comments relating to the role of the viewer as an essential ingredient in the parameters that art must fall, such as arts' need to evoke emotion response from viewers or make viewers consider new ideas, ask questions or challenge perspectives. Tsorf felt the judgement of whether something is or isn't art is made at an almost unconscious level by stating, "I guess I'm saying that art takes on a larger importance that ultimately makes my brain say, that is art." A few noted that if art challenges the viewer an artist-viewer exchange is necessary for viewers to recognise it as art. Anna noted this by stating, "If art is a garbage can on the ground, there must be a higher purpose and intent. This must be clearly stated so that people can give input. Without the audience understanding, it's kind of useless." This sentiment was felt by a few participants who felt it was essential for the viewers to have guidance from the artist if the piece was difficult to understand. Guidance, such as an accessible statement of intent, would prevent the misunderstandings which often lead many to question the piece's worth. Other participants highlighted context and aesthetic elements as a means to identify works of art. Gayle stated that "I have only known art in a gallery, on a wall, displayed for show to the public," and Susie noted, "Art must have a very pleasing aspect, it should appeal

to the senses.” John however felt context and beauty was relevant, instead seeing art or “potential art” everywhere, all it requires is an individual to claim it as art.

**What Art Isn't.** When asked what art is not, the majority of participants reiterated their stance that they were not personally in the position to determine what someone claimed to be art, as ‘not art’. They did however delve into art that they had seen that they had instinctually questioned. Daisy felt art that appears violent, brutal, or exploitative would require a very powerful explanation from the artist to justify its existence before she would deem it to be valid. Claire reiterated this sentiment by noting the presence or absence of artist sincerity, stating that “some art is not a true reflection of the way their (the artist’s) mind thinks, its art from the outside in, not the inside out.” Gerome described the not uncommon questioning of more abstract forms of art. “There have been some really challenging pieces, like a canvas with one red dot. But because of how elaborate the artist statement is, it’s displayed in a gallery and deemed art. So I guess art should require some level of skill.” Many noted the need for purposeful intent, plan or design. Dorf, a music engineer in his late thirties, stated, “Something in nature is that is not created by humans can be beautiful, but it’s not art.” The vast majority of participants did state that their personal tastes did not have any bearing on if something was or was not art. Vanna eloquently summed up many participants feelings by stating, “I could object to the subject matter, materials, I may not like it or understand it, but that does not make it, not art.”

## Part Two of Interview - Making Meaning with a Selection of Transgressive Taboo Artwork

### Artwork

After data regarding participants' expectations in regards to art, they were shown one by one, three pieces of transgressive taboo artwork which included *Fox Face Platter* by Scott a.a. Bibus, *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* by Priscilla Bracks, and *Helena* by Marco Evaristti. For each of the three pieces, participants were told the name, year and title of the piece. As *Helena* is an installation, participants were shown photographs and were told the premise of the work. Participants were then asked to give their emotional reaction to each work presented, asked to describe what they saw, and were then asked questions regarding possible meaning, on a personal and societal level. After each participant had thoroughly explored the work in question to their satisfaction, they were asked if they considered each piece a valid work of art.

### ***Fox Face Platter* by Scott a.a. Bibus**

*Fox Face Platter* (see figure 2) was chosen as for this research not only because of its powerful visual impact, but it also offers participants visual content which they may draw upon when negotiating possible meanings. As well, *Fox Face Platter* brings a level of familiarity by employing established content of a traditional still life painting,



Figure 5 , *Still Life with Game Birds*, Cornelis Mahu (1613-1689)

albeit imbuing this custom with a strong undercurrent of transgressive confrontation. Dutch and Flemish 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century still life paintings included everyday natural or man-made objects such as fruit, game and vessels, often depicting scenes as found in kitchens and markets (see figure 5). While at the time of their emergence, still life paintings were considered to be among the lowest ranks of the art hierarchy as they were thought to be merely artistic studies of inanimate objects, they became more recognised with the emergence of vanitas (Schneider, 2003 p. 7). Vanitas, (derived from the Latin word emptiness) added an element of moral edification to still life paintings, as they included elements of content communicated through metaphor and visual syntax that would be 'read' by the viewer. Unquestionably, vanitas were steeped in symbolism, from their fading flowers, smouldering candles, and human skulls, they moved the viewer to consider their morality by reminding them of the brevity of life (Meijer, 2006, p 25).

*Fox Face Platter* brings the typical content of traditional still life paintings and the dark references of vanitas to a more uncomfortable and confrontational direction. Although this sculpture contains a plate, a cup, fruit and game, *Fox Face Platter* transcends vanitas' macabre content in that it is not a painting, but a sculpture that contains actual animal remains that possess a jarring level of realism. While the majority of participants assumed this piece was pro-vegetarian, the choice of a wild animal not typically eaten suggests myriad interpretations, adding a complexity that calls into question the larger set of animal-human, living-dead relationships. Such bleak re-ordering and reframing of possible truths combined with an element of farcical detachment is typical of many transgressive taboo artworks.

**Emotional Response and its Effect on Interpretation.** Viewer response to *Fox Face Platter* ranged from moderately positive to strongly negative. Viewers who described a positive emotional response stated that they felt curious and intrigued when they first saw the piece. Many more however, felt strong negative initial response, often making statements indicating disgust and discomfort. Having a strong negative response however, was not indicative of the participant being unable to find transformative meaning. Maria, who described herself as having a weak stomach, felt physically ill when looking at the piece initially. “After the sick feeling, what came to mind is that there is an animal there. I recently became a meat eater and it doesn’t disgust me when I see a cooked animal sitting on a plate, but why? I find that interesting. I think I am very much relating this piece to this struggle I’m having over eating meat. I think I’m still struggling with the decision. I didn’t eat meat for 10 years, and last year I started. And this picture calls up those feelings. I think art, like this kind, evokes emotion. The fact it touched something in me gives it a lot of artistic merit.” Other participants however, did have a great deal of difficulty finding meaning after a strong negative response. Sarge stated that the piece “makes me a bit angry actually” made further comments indicating she is a dog lover, and the animal in this piece reminded her of dogs that she is familiar with. Even with prompting to look at the objects, to guess, to come back to the piece in a few minutes, Sarge stated “I don’t know why anyone would do this; I don’t know what they (the artist) are trying to say.” This block, as well as her conflicted emotional response, made viewing this piece a personally frustrating experience for her. To ease this discomfort, Sarge wanted to know what the artist’s background was, perhaps searching for a clue or foothold upon

which she could build meaning. This interchange suggests that while transgressive art strives to evoke an emotional response in the viewer, some viewer's responses are so strong that they are unable to see past their visceral state of discomfort. Paul, a retired fire fighter in his late sixties, also had a strong negative response to the piece, stating right away that he did not think this was art. Rather than looking for meaning but not finding any, Paul was quite different than Sarge in that he rejected the piece outright, stating "I don't feel like delving into it deeply to figure out what it means. It just doesn't look like much to me at all." Thus, this suggests something as simple as viewer demeanour and outlook may cripple the interpretive process before it even begins.

**Use of Title.** During each interview, the title of the piece was both read aloud to the participant as well as was present in large print above each picture on the computer screen. In the case of *Fox Face Platter*, relatively few participants utilized the title in a significant way when searching for meaning. By far, the majority felt the piece was a pro-vegetarian statement put forth by the artist with participants rarely commenting on the choice of a fox, equating it with as any other mammal that one might consume. Dorf stated "I'm a vegetarian. Sometimes people don't see what they are eating as a real animal. This puts a face to the food that you're eating." Les, a postal worker in his late thirties, continued with this sentiment noting, "Most of our food doesn't have faces. Having the fox look at us makes us feel uncomfortable." Other participants did puzzle over the use of a fox, attending to its status as animal not typically consumed. Gayle asked, "Why did he choose a fox? Does that have any symbolism in it? People know foxes are tricky, smart, wise, wily, but I can't make a connection to that." Vanna found the artist use of a wild animal as compounding her engagement with the piece. "It

makes me question why certain animals are in the food category and others are not. Why is a cow in that category and a fox isn't? All of the reasons are made up because there is nothing different between them. Whether it's a flank or a face, it's still an animal, a creature." Two participants did not attend to the title, and assumed the creature in the image was a fish, perhaps due to its triangular shape. This exchange, replacing a wild mammal with a commonly eaten fish, may have significantly impacted the interpretation for one of these participants, who was not able draw meaning other than "I don't know what it means, maybe it's just an interesting conversation piece."

**Is it Art?** All participants were asked at the end of this interpretive dialogue if they felt *Fox Face Platter* was a work of art, and offer their opinions on the piece. The majority of participants did feel *Fox Face Platter* was a legitimate work of art, in keeping with previous statements that felt art is subjective and had no right to deny a piece's 'artness'. Les felt it was a good work of art in that it had the ability to "open a discussion." Although Tsorf was not interesting in owning a piece like this, he did say "I would be interested in visiting a gallery with this type of work." Cindi, a teacher in her early fifties, also felt that although she would not buy it, or hang it in her home, it was a valid work art as the "artist has taken time to put this together, he didn't just throw it hither dither." In answering this question Anna included comments on the artist's sincerity, stating, "The first look is disgusting, but I think the artist is a sensitive person who is trying to relate to the audience and tell them that the meat on their plate is bloody." Jessica, a coach in her mid-thirties, who also felt this was a true work of art, eloquently expressed the power of the visual. "If someone wrote a piece of paper with their opinion on meat eating, I would probably read the first two sentences and think,

who cares, this is your opinion, not mine. This image, even if I just look at it for 10 seconds, gives me a more powerful impact. I see the idea behind it right away and has more impact than any words ever could.” Two participants expressed explicitly that they did not feel that this was a work of art. Paul, who had rejected the piece outright and had not attempted to find meaning, stated, “This is not a worthy piece of art.” Gayle, who felt art is generally found in galleries and possesses “a purposeful design,” also denied Fox Face Platter as achieving art status, primarily citing its aesthetic qualities, by stating, “It’s a disturbing picture. I can’t imagine anyone enjoying this. I don’t consider it to be a piece of art.”

### ***Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* by Priscilla Bracks**

*Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* (see figure 3) follows a powerful transgressive taboo tradition of subverting socio-cultural hierarchies; placing the culturally determined ‘low’ above or equal to the culturally determined ‘high’. Bracks, by designing a hologram that shifts from Osama Bin Laden, perhaps one of the most evil terrorist figures of the past 50 years as defined by Western culture, to Jesus Christ, one of the most sacred and revered figures as defined by Western culture, breaches dearly held concepts about these two icons, in essence mongrelising Christ and elevating Osama Bin Laden. (It should be noted that this stated interpretation of which figure is ‘high’ and which is ‘low’ is primarily a North American/European construct, as the reverse may be true in other parts of the world.) Such a powerful and unexpected overlap between these two icons forces the viewer to examine and re-examine doctrinal truths, as it jumbles what many might feel ought to remain distinct. By

compelling the viewer to search for similarities between Jesus and Osama Bin Laden, the viewer may be forced to consider Bin Laden's humanity as well as acts of violence committed in the name of Jesus Christ. Thus, interpretations may well reflect the viewers' political, spiritual, and philosophical established underpinnings, as well as call those underpinnings into question. Such uncomfortable reversals, mixtures and forced comparisons of worthy/unworthy culturally bound constructs are reflected in many transgressive taboo works of art.

**Emotional Response.** Shortly after being shown *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross*, participants were asked to describe their immediate emotional response, to which the majority responded either strongly or moderately positive feelings. Strong positive responses ranged from Francesca who felt the piece was "genius" to Vanna who stated, "I feel excited by this piece because it is so challenging. It suggests something that I've not thought of before, something I know would be shocking to so many people. It is intellectually and emotionally exciting." Indeed, many of the participants verbally stated that their lack of religious convictions allowed them to look more favourably upon the piece. Fewer in number, but equally as passionate were participants who felt a strong negative reaction. Jessica responded to the piece by saying, "Because I'm Catholic, I am offended." In addition to this, several participants noted that "being religious" could make viewing this piece uncomfortable. Gerome summed this sentiment up by stating, "I'm not religious, but this piece would cause a lot of uproar. It could be super offensive." Others were more specific on who it may offend such as Tsorf, who stated, "right-wing Fundamentalist Christians would be very

disturbed by this.” Regardless of initial emotional response, all participants were willing to explore possible meanings that this piece proposed.

**Juxtaposition of “Good” and “Evil”.** Several participants felt the piece was drawing direct historical comparisons between Osama Bin Laden and Jesus Christ. Others felt *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* was targeting those who were strongly religious, extending this connection by directing their attention to the power of politics and the media in scapegoating Bin Laden by equating his acts (or alleged acts) with the Muslim faith. Like many participants, Kijana, an immigrant support worker in his mid-fifties, articulated several parallels in both men’s lives, “They were both very driven, both persecuted, both had ideologies not popular during their lives. Both of them, right or wrong, believed they were doing the right thing.” Paul reiterated this sentiment and expanded on it by stating, “Bin Laden may follow Christ’s pattern if the Muslims take over the world. But Islam is a very gentle religion, so it would have to be the extremists who would have to rewrite history and place Bin Laden in a Christ-like position.” Claire felt that by forcing the viewer to draw similarities, this piece directly challenged those with intolerant religious beliefs. To articulate this point, Claire stated, “I think everyone thinks their God is *the* God, and everyone else has got it wrong. This piece is asking people to leave room for the fact that there has been a lot of hate and intolerance that comes in the name of Jesus.” Vanna related this juxtaposition as an attempt to force dialogue about the Muslim-Christian divide, “Over the last 10 years, there has been such a polarization between the east and west and between Christianity and a number of other eastern religions. I think the eastern religions have been Othered. They have been turned into something almost not human or very different

than us. I see this in tons of different war times, because it allows us to do damage because it is hard to hurt people just like us.” To further this political slant, Maria was among many who felt the media played a role in the mythology of Osama Bin Laden, “Osama Bin Laden symbolises war and violence, the media sees it this way. I am an American, I voted in the presidential election that led to the war on terrorism, I was an American during 9/11, and I am exposed to the media that daily plays into this issue.” Kijana also felt the media “scapegoated” Bin Laden and he was one of two participants who questioned Bin Laden’s involvement in 9/11. While most participants were able to draw similarities and examine the histories of these two men with an element of objectivity, several non-religious and religious participants appeared to be reluctant to consider that Bin Laden was anything other than evil and that Jesus was anything other than good. Les felt that similarities extended principally to Bin Laden and Jesus’ geographical origin and physical appearance, stating “They were removed from each other philosophically because Osama believed in violence and Jesus is about turning the other cheek.” The youngest participant was unable to comment on the meaning of this piece. Although she was aware of the history of 9/11, Lily did not recognise Bin Laden’s image, nor was she completely aware of his purported role in this terrorist act.

**Use of Title.** Very few participants commented on or referred to the title of this piece when searching for meaning. It appeared that several participants felt the juxtaposition between the two iconic symbols was so powerful, that the title may have taken a nonessential role in the meaning making process. To Claire however, ‘*Making the Empire Cross*’ referred to anger from both sides, “When I look at the title, *Making the Empire Cross*, a lot of wars are really based on religion. I think this piece is asking

why did Osama Bin Laden hate Americans? Maybe they didn't like what Americans were doing politically in other countries for so many years." Claire went on to note the artist's use of the word '*Oriental*s'. "She (Bracks) called them Orientals; she is bunching them together as a statement, because there was a lot of bigotry towards all Muslims after 911". Les also noted the use of the word Orientals as an indication of geographic origin, stating, "They do come from the same part of the world and believe some of the same things."

**Is it Art?** Overwhelmingly, the participants felt *Bearded Orientals, Making the Empire Cross* was a powerful work of art. Gerome stated, "I think it's legitimate because it evokes an emotional response and would create a conversation." Susie also praised the artist stating, "I really think this is a valuable piece because it's a concept that a lot of people would never come up with. It takes quite a bit of genius to put this together." Even Jessica, who was the most offended participant due to her Catholic faith, did not deny this piece validity outright, rather diplomatically stating "I understand that people have different religious beliefs, and it is offensive to me because the image of Jesus I have been brought up with is the image of him trying to help people, whereas Osama Bin Laden is one of destruction and terror. Everyone has their opinion on whether this is art or not, but not everyone has to look at it if they don't want to."

### ***Helena* by Marco Evaristti**

The Evaristti's installation *Helena* (see figure 4 and 6) is a strong example of transgressive taboo art that examines morality by suspending morality. By placing ten

plugged in blenders, each with water and a goldfish, Evaristti created a situation that has the potential to tap into repressed impulses of sadism or voyeurism. To do this,

*Helena* temporarily erases the imaginary line that separates viewers from the temptation that they may feel when offered the choice to engage in pointless acts of cruelty, while simultaneously creating an empathetic/voyeuristic response in other viewers. When faced with this installation, viewers must weigh several options. They



Figure 6, *Helena*, 2000, Marco Evaristti  
(View from inside a blender)  
Reprinted with permission from the artist.

must evaluate their own dark impulses, they must anticipate the impulses of others, they must speculate on their response or lack of response to acts of cruelty, as well as the consequences that these choices may instil. Thus, to engage with this installation forces us to examine if our relationships with other creatures are bound by morality, as well as to face our own and others' repressed urges to engage in senseless violence. By asking such questions about one's basest instincts, viewers are made to reflect upon the primary elements of human nature and where they stand along the spectrum of humanity.

**Initial Emotional Response.** Although viewing photographs of the installation *Helena* was certainly a less powerful experience than viewers may have felt during the live exhibition in 2000, the majority of the participants did report feeling a very powerful

positive or strong negative response when exposed to the premise and photographs of the installation. On one side, some participants felt the piece was “intriguing” or “hilarious, funny, kind of cute and daring.” On the other, some participants were clearly outraged, such as Cindi who stated “Bulls\*\*t. This is clearly animal abuse.” Others were highly anxious, such as Anna who stated, “It feels like the edge of humanity and I am looking at the dark side. I know there is a dark side; I just don’t want to witness it. I want to say, please don’t go there.” Several participants also noted conflicted feelings, as Vanna illustrated when she said, “I feel excited and horrified at the same time.” Two participants identified themselves as feeling more irritation than anything else. Francesca’s first thought was *Helena* was, “lazy. I prefer art that takes artistic skill.”

**Finding Meaning.** Several participants identified this piece as ‘an experiment’ as Kijana suggested that viewers would either “pass or fail.” Many saw the purpose of this piece as an attempt to reveal a true person’s character, as Les described, “There are three classes of people. Those who would liquefy the fish, those who won’t, and those who will follow the majority and don’t want to take a stand.” John also felt that it would separate the audience into those who moralize, described as, “people who would get frothy over this,” and those who would press the button, described as, “people who like to dance close to an issue, people who like to test boundaries.” Other’s felt that wanting to liquefy the fish could be a normal urge. Claire stated, “Maybe that darkness is in everyone. Like when people stop at a light and there is a baby in a stroller, sometimes people have these crazy feelings, weird sick impulses. No one would ever do it, but we all have these thoughts.” A few participants noted this piece would also highlight voyeuristic urges that they or others may have. Daisy noted that this piece could “prove

people like to watch people who are violent.” Additionally, Maria felt the desire to watch was a human weakness, “We are drawn to horror and shock in a lot of ways. A lot of people can’t look away from a car crash. We like to watch public disgraces and the fall of people. There is something about us, we just can’t fight it.” Others openly admitted that they would be tempted to press the button and liquefy the fish. One participant noted, “I would get a thrill out of pressing the button. I wouldn’t feel guilty; I’m not worried about the goldfish.” In contrast to this, a few participants took a righteous stance to this piece, identifying themselves as not only not tempted to press the button, but felt they did not associate with people who would. Tsorf noted that, “If I was with someone who pressed the button, I would think differently about them,” and Kijana stated, “People I know don’t do things like that.” As John felt it was quite unlikely that anyone would press the button, felt this piece has a more positive message, “as a reminder that not everyone is bad.”

A few participants had equally viable alternate meanings. Both Susie and Sarge felt that humanity shares the vulnerability of the goldfish. Susie stated, “Maybe it’s equating us to the fish in the blender, like we are trapped and could be liquefied at any minute. Maybe it’s reminding us that at any instant, your life can be taken away.” Sarge expanded on this notion by stating “it’s showing us that we’re f\*\*ked, like can’t I get off this planet? On a bigger level, we are all trapped in existence” Other alternate interpretations included Vanna who felt “maybe it is asking viewers if the cruelty to animals is an individual choice, or if we are responsible for other’s choices. So if someone is cruel, we are all complicit. Or maybe we should be able to mistreat our own pets, like hurt them if you want to.” Francesca felt the piece could “have something to

do with consumerism or how our lives have evolved, because these are common household appliances mixed with living creatures.”

**Use of Title.** In this particular piece, only one participant mentioned the title *Helena*, asking its significance (of which I did not know). No other participants mentioned the title throughout the process, perhaps as they felt it did not provide any information that would help in the meaning making process.

**Use of Goldfish.** It appeared that the use of goldfish rather than another fish or animal was of significance to several participants. For several, goldfish represented a less important form of life. Claire summed up several others’ sentiments by stating, “Goldfish are very disposable for some reason, like frat boys eat them. They represent a sort of nothingness. Have you ever seen someone sob because their goldfish died? Not really. Yet they are beautiful even though they are a dime a dozen.” This ‘goldfish as nothingness’ outlook strongly coincided with participants who had a more positive initial emotional response. For example, one participant who, when first hearing about the piece stated, “It makes me laugh, because when I was young, every time a goldfish died, we would dissect it. No one really cares about goldfish. People get them all the time, they die and people flush them.” Other participants were thankful that the artist chose goldfish and not another animal, as the emotional impact would be more alarming. Susie stated, “Although fish aren’t really...it’s not a dog in there! That would be worse.” When asked to clarify, Susie admitted, “I guess I’m saying fish and dogs aren’t equal.” Others felt strongly that although goldfish were considered throw-away by many, they felt goldfish were valuable, similar to any other creature. These participants

consistently had a strong initial negative reaction to the piece, often mentioning, first goldfish, what next? Anna stated, “To me a goldfish is just as valuable as those who would be sitting in the room. Just switch it around and put a person in there (the blender), let’s make the blenders bigger and put a street person in there.”

**Emotional Impact on Making Meaning.** As it would appear, anger or outrage can greatly impact viewers’ ability to make meaning with this piece, disabling the desire for participants to see beyond the façade of immorality. Cindi felt strongly that *Helena* was an unjustifiable act of degeneracy, stating, “My initial thought was, who gives him (the artist) the right to do this? It’s an immoral act. What are they trying to prove? That we think so little of things that someone should allow this to happen for entertainment or for art’s sake?” Other participants dismissed the piece outright, questioning the artist’s sincerity. Paul illustrated this when stating, “I have a suspicion about the artist’s motives. I wonder how much for a grant he got. I think the artist just wants to get himself known, that’s what comes to mind.” Neither of these participants were willing to draw any meaning from this installation. Initial outrage or dismissal did not stand in the way of other participants however, especially when they were willing to dialogue about it. Initially, Sarge felt a strongly negative reaction towards the installation and a great deal of difficulty seeing past *Helena* as simply an exercise in killing fish. She began the dialogue by expressing deep empathy for the fish “It makes me feel really bad for the fish, I mean holy f\*\*k, can you imagine being those fish?” She then moved to questioning the artist’s choices and motives, “Why would anyone do this? Why does something have to lose its life for art? I don’t like it, I find it disturbing.” Soon after further dialogue and consideration, Sarge began to unravel a deeper more personal

meaning, “It would be upsetting to see someone go up and make fish stew, but then I eat fish, so what’s wrong with that?” This began a more introspective line of reflective reasoning, “Maybe my view of art is very narrow. This is interesting... that’s maybe the good thing about challenging art. You can walk away and it shifts your perspective more than when someone puts dots on the canvas of people enjoying an afternoon along the riverbank. You know, I could walk away and become a vegetarian because of that piece of art, so sitting here and talking about it I’ve changed my mind. It’s got a holy (large impact). This is the most compelling of the three (pieces). It will stay with me the longest.”

**Is it Art?** The participants were split three ways in answering this question: those who felt *Helena* was art, those who felt it was not art due to immorality, and those who questioned the ‘artness’ of installations that require audience participation. For the majority who felt *Helena* was art, many cited its strong ability to evoke emotion, generate critical self-reflection, and inspire meaningful viewer interaction. Tsorf stated, “I think *Helena* is interesting. I want to know the answers to the questions it asks. I do see its validity and its attempt to make a point about human nature. It’s a pretty strong piece.” Of the two participants who did not or would not find meaning in this work of art, neither acknowledged *Helena* as a work of art. Cindi, outraged by the potential cruelty to animals, did not waver from her stance. Not surprisingly, she stated, “There is nothing in their piece that would justify it being called art.” A few participants questioned *Helena*’s status as an art piece, due to the artist’s reliance on viewer response. Daisy turned this question over in her mind, stating: “Because people are participating in it and we have to be involved in killing the fish, maybe its not art. The artist just plugged

them (the blenders) in. If you're participating, is that art?" Gayle also was not able to fit *Helena* into the parameters she had set that for her defined art, stating, "I don't think this is a piece of art because it looks like more of an experiment than a piece of art, an experiment about human nature."

### **Effect of Hiatus**

When faced with dilemmas that evoke problem solving strategies, Jack Mezirow (1990) noted that when given a short break, people often reassess perspectives and possibly alter them upon reflection (p. 5). I felt that because several pieces evoked strong negative emotional response, that those who were stymied in the meaning making process may have additional thoughts once their emotional state returned to an equilibrium. To allow for this hiatus, participants were contacted two to five days after initial viewing to express any additional insights they may have upon reflection, or to change, add to, or alter their initial interpretation. The results were surprising and consistent. Rarely did participants bring forth additional insight into the meaning making process. The vast majority felt satisfied with their initial reactions, only requesting minor changes to amend awkward wording. The only exception was Sarge, who initially struggled to find meaning with *Fox Face Platter*, was not satisfied with her comments regarding this piece. Frustratingly for her, she remained "stuck" after several days, unable to formulate any further possible meanings, despite her efforts.

A few factors may have impacted this overall lack of ongoing critical reflection. The first being that the artwork presented were not chosen by participants to reflect upon, rather pieces were imposed. Such imposition may have significantly dampened

participants' motivation to meander with their thoughts and to ponder possible meanings well after initial exposure. Another possibility may be that participants felt relatively confident that, during the initial interview's dialogic process, they had fully explored possible meanings. A further factor may be that many participants may not have felt completely at ease talking with the researcher again to revisit pieces that they may have disliked or felt uncomfortable about. Regardless, the impact of a hiatus in this research did not notably impact the meaning making process.

## Chapter Five: Data Analysis

The data in this study reveals several consistencies with research that has examined the nature of art interpretation when viewers are making sense of art that is traditional in content and form, as well as notable differences. Similarities include evaluation acts, participant comments on colour and composition and interpretation by use of metaphor. Differences include the inconsistent use of title, a lack of instances where participants invented storylines to unite visual elements in favour of art/artist messages, as well as the predominance of comments that indicated participants were referencing a preconceived self-position as the entry point for interpretive engagement. Also in this chapter include a section on the impact of dialogue on the meaning making process, the effect of stated art expectations, and commentary regarding those who were unwilling or unable to make meaning. The data in this study was able to reveal a great deal about the circumstances in which transgressive taboo art successfully widens perspectives and the circumstances in which meaningful interaction is not successful. This in turn, offered insight into how one successfully integrate this genre into an educational setting. Particular recommendations for this integration follow this chapter.

### **Evaluation Acts**

Similar to Bruder and Ucok's (2000) findings of "evaluation acts" (p. 341), participants in this study also expressed clear statements of like or dislike and made statements regarding the desire to own or not own, with the vast majority stating that while they appreciated the 'artness' of each of the three pieces, they were not

conducive to their tastes. Also parallel to Bruder and Ucok findings, participants in this study displayed some reservations of judgement, openness to further consideration, as well as adjusting and reconciling their judgements of worth. Such transformative engagement was directly tied to participants' willingness to partake in participatory problem solving via dialogue. For those who did not wish to participate in open exploration, their initial judgements (typically negative) remained relatively constant throughout the interpretive process.

### **Colour and Composition**

Also consistent with Bruder and Ucok's (2000) observations were regular participant commentary on colour and composition. This surprised me, as I anticipated that the negative emotional responses of viewers would override the detachment Immanuel Kant (1790) outlined in *Critique of Judgement* necessary for an objective aesthetic evaluation. This did not appear to be the case for several participants. For example, while the piece *Helena* made Anna feel highly anxious, she made positive comments on its aesthetic appearance, stating, "It's white and clean and beautiful. Its looks lovely, but I see it as representing the dark side of humanity." Others noted aspects of colour and composition as a means to enhance the atmosphere of the installation *Helena*, as Claire noted, "They are very sleek, clean looking blenders. The yellow button and the goldfish are the only colours in this piece. The goldfish are very bright and vibrant, and so is the button that will kill them." Several participants commented that *Fox Face Platter* was well composed, including those who had a strong negative response. Thus it would appear that without prompting or

encouragement, many participants were able to put aside powerful negative emotional responses in order to objectively evaluate and/or comment on transgressive taboo art's aesthetic qualities.

### **Search for Metaphor**

Correspondingly, participants in this research also searched for clues and constructed meaning via metaphor, much like Bruder and Ucok's (2000) participants. To begin, *Fox Face Platter* offered participants recognizable visual elements that participants utilized during their meaning making process. For the majority of participants, connections between visual content and metaphor came quickly and easily. Most participants swiftly concluded that the plated dismembered animal spoke to an anti-meat sentiment, and thus assigned meaning to the secondary content that supported this theory. Thus, for many the grapes signified eyes (often seen as the eyes of other animal victims) and liquid in the cup symbolised blood. Others like Gayle, struggled to find metaphor, seeing her inability to connect as tied to an interruption in artist-viewer communication, "Why grapes? I'm trying to think of why the artist chose these details. Is there a purpose to having liquid in the cup, being that full? Is there a purpose for there being only two grapes in that cup? Is there a purpose for the cup being green? I'm trying to put all these pieces together, but I'm not coming up with a whole lot." Unlike those who quickly assigned meaning based on the most prominent feature (the fox face), Gayle attempted to weigh all aspects and details equally in an attempt to speculate on the artist's intent and became frustrated and distracted by this approach.

*Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* offers the viewer two recognizable portraits as the principle visual element. The majority of participants felt that the overlap signifies similarity between the two figures, rather than representing opposite sides of a continuum. A few participants looked toward the hologram effect itself as a source for metaphor. Gerome wondered



Figure 7, *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross*, 2000, P. Bracks, (view of overlapping portraits)  
Reprinted with permission from the artist.

if the artist purposely intended Osama Bin Laden's image to be viewed from the left, stating, "The left side is Osama's side. There is this idea that the devil sits on your left shoulder. If you approach the piece from the left side, you see an evil image, does this represent the devil?" Maria also noted that the center panel, where Osama Bin Laden and Jesus Christ's portraits overlap, Osama's portrait is more dominant. The hologram effect adds a halo to Bin Laden's head and cross around his neck making his appearance similar to a portrait of a saint (see figure 7). While Maria took time to verbalise of this observation, many others likely noted this virtuous version of Osama, as several participants made positive comments about him. Such comments as "This is a peaceful, handsome picture of him (Osama Bin Laden)" made me wonder if this juxtaposition and the visual effect of Bin Laden with a halo and cross reinforced previously held notions of sympathy or if this piece suggested a sympathetic response and then through meaning making, actualized it.

*Helena* was a rich source of a variety of metaphors, principally the audience as a mirror of society at large. This sentiment is well illustrated by Kijana, who stated, “I would say, out of 20 people only one would press the button (and liquefy a fish). People can be abusive physically, sexually, and emotionally. There are only a small percentage of them, but they have a high impact.” A few participants extended the metaphor of ‘pressing the button’ to other everyday acts of cruelty and disregard for others. Maria stated, “I don’t want to push the button, but I know my everyday actions indirectly involve the killing of animals. It makes me think about the ethics of our behaviour, like how I live my life. I might buy things that maybe are made by small children. As long as I’m not ‘pushing the button’ it doesn’t bother me.” Goldfish and their throw away status were also explored by many, primarily as representing the innocent victims of human cruelty.

### **Use of Title**

Franklin, Doyle, and Becklen’s (1993) research outlined in their article “The Influence of Titles on how Paintings are seen” determined that titles enter into the construction of meaning in the majority of time; a position cannot be supported or refuted by this research. For each of the three pieces, the title and artist’s name were read aloud to each participant as well as were written in large font above each piece. In the instance of *Fox Face Platter*, the majority of participants did attend to the title. This was demonstrated by their reference to the animal in question as a fox, a conclusion that could not have come simply by its appearance. This use of title to determine the species of animal however did not lead many to extend this knowledge, as few

explored symbolism associated with foxes or other typical western encounters with them such as hunting, trapping, fur wearing and/or taxidermy trophy mounting. In fact, for most the presence of a fox (and all that it means to be a fox) was a non sequitur, as the majority of participants quickly concluded the piece was anti-meat eating, therefore the fox was equated with (or represented) consumable mammals. In this incidence, the title did offer participants some information that they utilized when talking about the piece, but for the majority the piece's visual elements (such as the placement of an animal on a plate) were far more influential when making meaning.

For both *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* and *Helena*, the titles were largely ignored by the majority of participants. For *Helena*, there is no obvious connection between the name and the installation, therefore it does not provide additional information that a viewer may readily access. Despite offering the viewer much more information, the title *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* was attended to by relatively few participants. In fact, on many occasions I felt many participants were so closely absorbed with the work's visual elements that they did not see (or hear) the title or the artist's name. This was evidenced by the many participants who referred to the artist, Priscilla Bracks, as a 'he'. Perhaps on these occasions, the visual impact of the work and the power of its symbolic implications may distract viewers away from the title and thus it is often overlooked during the interpretive process.

## Narration and Art/Artist Message

The most notable difference between viewers of transgressive works in this study of art and viewers of non-transgressive art found in the work of Bruder & Ucok (2000), and Franklin, Doyle & Becken (1993) was the lack of narration during the meaning making process. Only one participant out of 19 attempted to introduce a storyline with explicit temporal dimensions for one of the three pieces shown. This act of narration had the benefit of allowing this participant to incorporate of all aspects of *Fox Face Platter*, including accounting for the not typically eaten fox, a factor which many ignored once they settled on the premise that the piece was anti-meat eating. Daisy felt *Fox Face Platter* was depicting a picnic gone awry. "It's like a picnic, maybe the fox was killed on the way to the picnic. They ran over a fox. It's something about carelessness...people going into nature and not caring where they are going. Maybe the blood is about violence, like when something is hit on the side of the road and forgotten." Daisy's story not only established connections between visual elements and textural information found in the title, it served to organize and unify her interpretation without contradiction, albeit creatively. In all other incidences, participants including Daisy did not construct narratives to create links between what could be seen and what they believed was inferred. Instead, participants favoured 'statements' or implicit messages about an under examined presupposition seen as possible truth or suggested truth.

For many participants, artworks were seen as directly representing the subjectivity of the creator, in keeping with previously stated art expectations. These participants

approached the works by attempting to 'read' them for clues left for them by the maker in order to speculate on possible political, psychological, historical, or ethical messages. This approach supports Bhabha's (2001) position that many viewers believe that hidden within art is a message or statement left by the artist. In order to correctly interpret this message, they attempt to decipher it using a metissage of visual content, worldly understandings and metaphor. This approach was evident during several interviews as many participants began their propositions with "I think the artist is trying to make a statement about..." followed by speculation regarding the artist's intent. For the few participants who maintained this approach consistently throughout the process of interpretation, it not only placed them as secondary meaning makers to the artist, it thwarted personal connections and critical reflection based on new knowledge. For these participants appear to believe that the true (and most significant) meaning of art lies with the original intent of the artist. While many began the meaning making process this way, many also consciously or unconsciously discarded this approach in favour of a first person meaning construction. For several, this transition appeared quite natural, as participants began to create and adjust theories of meaning based on personal insights and burgeoning connections. This fluid, dynamic stage of making meaning was often reached through a combination of monologue in the form of articulated self talk and/or dialogue with me as interviewer, in what can be described as attempts to problem solve through a series of creative meanderings, negotiated suppositions and ever more questions.

Fewer in number were participants who began the process of interpretation by anointing themselves as principal authors of meaning by exploring a form of

communication between themselves and the artwork, leaving the artist out of the equation. In these cases, metaphor appeared to be formed on the reciprocal middle ground between the artwork and the participant, as the participant built personal and experiential connections from suggestions or perspectives offered by the artwork. Regardless of when during the process, those who placed themselves as primary constructors of meaning were more apt to explore personal and societal assumptions and contradictions. That being said, this approach does not guarantee deeply meaningful insights or discovery of new knowledge, as without willingness to engage in candid and sincere critical reflection, transformative realizations were half actualized at best.

### **Self-Positioning**

Another markedly different pattern found when viewers engage with transgressive works of art is a strong sense of self-positioning as participants make explicit statements and implicit suggestions regarding aspects of their personality, preferences, and beliefs, as well as 'others' who they were not allied with. It appeared time and time again that the artwork in question provoked participants to cast their eyes along the spectrum of humanity, and it was through the meaning making process that they negotiated where they lay on that spectrum, weighing long held self-definitions against new questions and information brought forth by the work of art. Harre and Davies (1990) wrote in their work "Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves", individuals position themselves in terms of categories and then sub categories, seeing the world from this perspective. These statements of positioning are affirmed with the

illocutionary force of articulation, and as such serve to 'position' the speaker by assigning himself or herself a trait or character (p.8). This self-positioning was evident when the transgressive taboo art presented asked participants a question or posed a problem situation and participants responded by accessing an established perspective as the primary fore-structure for further reflection. Explicit sentiments such as "I am not religious," "I am a vegetarian" and "I am not the kind of person who would do that," as well as inferred references to character and values were the types of statements heard over and over as participants determined how they would begin to answer the question, solve the problem, or respond to the dilemma. This suggests that making meaning begins from an established concept of who we believed we are. Quite often, self-positioning appeared to come directly from a known paradigm (I am this, so I think this) and often appeared to be tied to emotional response (I feel this, because I am this). Frequently this process called for action in keeping with participant's self-concept (I am this, so I must do this). Anna's need for control over the potential chaos presented by *Helena* served to soothe her discomfort. Throughout this segment of the interview Anna appeared deeply disturbed by the questions *Helena* asked. When asked how she would respond if she were standing before this installation and someone she knew pressed the button to liquefy a fish, she responded, "To me that goldfish is pretty valuable, so if I knew some one who pressed the button, I'd be pretty upset. I would be ranting and asking them what are you doing? Why are you doing that?" In order to ease this anxiety, she imagined a scenario where she could gain control over the piece, in essence intervening with the audience so that they were more mindful of choices presented. "If I put that display out (*Helena*), I would set it up so there were seats in

front and the audience would have to sit and observe for a while. I wouldn't lecture them, but I would want to lead a dialogue about it and keep it open for interaction. I want to convert more people to the side of the good." While Anna and other participants felt a need to avert pointless cruelty, others identified why they would not be able to intervene, as Lily stated, "I would not want anyone to press the button. I feel anxious by this, but I would be too shy to stop anyone." Sarge's strong negative emotional reaction and the subsequent mental block she experienced when attempting to find meaning in *Fox Face Platter* also made a clear statement about her relationships, her boundaries, and thus her self-position. From the first point of contact with the piece, Sarge associated her strong negative response as originating from her self-position as a dog lover. This in turn sparked a conflict between her desire to find meaning (and successfully participate in this study) and damning assumptions imposed by the fox's physical similarity to a dog. Upon examination of her transcripts, it appears that this stalemate (in which Sarge could not find meaning despite expressing a strong desire to find meaning) may well reflect the sensibilities of divergent self-positions.

Also significant were participants' comments that served to define the type of person that they believed they were not. 'Others' included those who were duped by the media, those who are easily offended, and those who were thoughtless and cruel. Such statements also served to buttress connections with a spoken or unspoken sub-categories, such as Dorf who when finding meaning in *Fox Face Platter* stated, "I'm a vegetarian. Sometimes people don't see what they are eating as a real animal. This piece puts a face to what you're eating. It makes you think, why is this art grotesque and the steak I'm eating isn't?" In essence, Dorf is implying that *Fox Face*

*Platter* is not only supportive of his sub category, vegetarianism, but is confronting those who he is not allied with, meat eaters. Not surprisingly, Dorf had a more positive emotional response to *Fox Face Platter* than the majority of participants.

Other times, aspects of self-position appeared to be forged on the spot (I feel this, therefore I must be like this). For some participants, feelings and responses were in direct contradiction with their image of themselves, creating an element of cognitive dissonance. Maria's initial response to *Helena* startled her, as she momentarily felt she may be tempted to press the button, "Initially, I thought I might want to, but now I think I'm not that person. I don't know why I felt that way, why I wanted to. But I did have that thought, part of me wanted to, I was drawn to the horror." Such troubling acknowledgements appeared to be quite difficult for her to rectify, as she looked visibly uncomfortable when reflecting upon this conflicted self-concept. Other participants also felt strong mis-alliances between their responses and their customary habits. Vanna noted this disconnect when discussing *Fox Face Platter*, stating, "There is so much tension, and so much hypocrisy. I don't try to talk people out of eating meat. I allow others to make those choices. I think it is because we are bearing witness and animal slaughter is not happening in this case behind factory doors." Such inner conflict has potential to be transformative. As Festinger (1957) notes, new information may create a momentary dissonance when this information conflicts with what people believe to be true about themselves. To reduce this dissonance, people often either change their behaviour and thinking to match the new reality or they enter a mindset of denial (p. 6). Piaget (1952) also suggests that the uncomfortable state of cognitive disequilibrium can lead to cognitive reorganization as old ways of thinking no longer suffice. Perhaps in

these instances, dissonance does not occur in the sense of transforming one's behaviour on a permanent basis, but rather art inspired dissonance may make participants more critical reflective of their self-position, and thus slightly shift the inner compass upon which they build understanding. Thus, Maria must either acknowledge her fleeting temptation to engage in pointless cruelty and adjust her self-concept accordingly, or she may deny its existence and in so doing reject this transformative opportunity. As well, Vanna must accept elements of hypocrisy in the food industry (and adjust or expand her moral stance on this issue) or downplay her revelations after the interview is over and resume the status quo. While I feel it is unlikely to assume that the insights brought about by cognitive dissonance in this research will significantly impact participants' self-position and corresponding actions (Maria will not likely seek therapy for impulse control nor will Vanna likely become a vegan), transgressive taboo art offers us a unique set of raw materials in which we may forge new understandings of who we are, as we critically engage ourselves and our identities. Kegan (2000) supports this understated form of transformational learning. When deeply engaged with subject matter that alters perspectives, viewer/participants undergo an adjustment in their frame of reference. This typically creates epistemological adjustment rather than a change in their behavioural repertoire (p. 48).

### **The Power of Dialogue**

Open-ended dialogue between myself (as interviewer) and participants led many to deepen their understanding of the three pieces presented. Careful not to coerce or impose, I often used open dialogue such as asking open ended questions as a means to propel the participants forward when their responses seemed to stall or stagnate.

Soon it became evident that the longer participants lingered with the piece and the more they engaged in meaningful dialogue, the more transcendent their conclusions. In many cases dialogue transformed meaning making from emotional reaction to critical reflection on past/present/future orientations. This dialogic engagement, in many cases, appeared to be a crucial element to accessing the pedagogy of the artwork presented. This is not to say that dialogue helped participants to ‘talk past’ or overcome their feelings, rather it served to broaden initial assumptions and helped develop an epistemological relationship between what was known and felt, and what else could be true. In this way, transgressive art served as a source of provocation for a pedagogic interaction. To illustrate is an edited selection of my dialogue with Gerome over the piece *Helena* immediately following a short explanation of the premise of the installation.

Interviewer: So what is your first response to this piece, what do you think of it?

Gerome: Oh! I find it disturbing. But my response is kind of like...I don't know what he (the artist) is trying to say? I don't even know if it even deserves over intellectualizing. Maybe he just woke up one day and said, today I'll kill goldfish, tomorrow puppies, next time it's going to be little children. It seems like a shock value type of thing.

Interviewer: Tell me more about that, what makes you think that?

Gerome: It's like, so what. You go up and you liquefy a fish. What happens then? I don't understand where this is going. I get the Osama Bin Laden and Jesus piece,

because there is some type of conversation that would happen. This one is...I don't know where the conversation goes.

Interviewer: Okay, let's talk about that. Imagine if you were in the gallery, standing in front of it, how would you feel? Would you feel anxious that someone would press the button? Would you be tempted to press the button? What would be your thoughts be if you were standing in front of this with 20 other people around you?

Gerome: I don't think I would press the button myself, not that I love goldfish or anything, I just don't find the value in killing a goldfish for that purpose. But, I would feel anxious that people would walk up and push the button; I wouldn't like to watch it. If it (the blender) were turned on, I would turn away.

Interviewer: How would you feel about someone who did press the button? Would it change the way you thought about them? Imagine you were with someone who pressed the button.

Gerome: That's a good question. Maybe...I would probably ask... why? You already knew what you happen, why did you push the button?

Interviewer: So you would be curious to know what would motivate someone to do that?

Gerome: Right, right.

Interviewer: Okay, so is there anything this piece is suggesting, asking, or making you think of?

Gerome: I suppose it could expose that society at large can be very cruel. Some people would just press the button with no reason to, just because they felt like it. Just like there are also senseless killings around the world, with acts of cruelty and what not.

Interviewer: Would you say this is a legitimate piece of art, or is it still on the fence? What is your opinion of this piece?

Gerome: When I talk about it and frame it with how the audience interacts with each other, then I suppose yes, it is a piece of art. So if the piece of art makes it so the audience react with one another, that makes it a piece of art. There is a conversation or a judgement or a decision that the audience has to make.

Interviewer: Are you're saying this art is more about the audience than the fish and the blenders? It's about how the audience responds to this piece?

Gerome: I guess, now that you got me thinking about it, if that piece of art wasn't the way it was, there would be no interaction amongst audience members. If it wasn't plugged in, no one would care, and that conversation would not happen.

Interviewer: So there has to be some sort of element of danger or violence that would provoke us to feel something, or do something, or talk about something?

Gerome: Right. There needs to be something to provoke us to feel something, or it's empty.

Such dialogue illustrates that dialogue between me and the participant encourages both parties to voice, consider, and reconsider multiple layers of meaning. Consensus

between us was not attempted, nor did feel necessary to reach consensus. Gerome entered the dialogue with the impression that *Helena* had little to offer other than shock value. At my prompting, he shifted his attention to what it would be like to actually be there, standing in front of *Helena* surrounded by others. This led Gerome to consider the problems posed by *Helena* and the troubling questions the installation asks of him and other audience members. Without this exchange, he may be apt to walk away, dismissing *Helena* as cruel and invalid. With this exchange, he sees this piece as valid and its potential cruelty as necessary for valuable dialogue. As with Gerome, other participants also showed a discernible shift in perspective with this type of exploratory exchange. In fact, it did not appear to matter what direction the dialogue took or what questions I posed, understandings continued to be shaped as the conversation lingered. Thus, the longer the participant was willing to test, reject, and revise possibilities, the more their perspective seemed to expand and contract, as possible truths were considered. Willingness however was vital to this process as illustrated by the few participants who resisted dialogue. Perhaps these individuals quickly determined that they did not like the piece in question (and thus, was not worthy of their time or energy) or felt that their self-position value set would allow them to entertain the truths that the piece was suggesting. Regardless of the reason, unwillingness to engage in an open dialogue appeared to result in a single fixed perspective. For example, one participant who stated “everyone knows Osama is evil,” resisted dialogue that may have challenged this notion, and thus the meaning of *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* was limited to superficial similarities between the two men.

## **Impact of Established Expectations**

I anticipated that art expectations would be of paramount importance to the interactive process of interpretation, and for the majority of participants, a degree of consistency prevailed. For those who stated that they prefer art that was edgy, raw, or ironic, were not surprisingly more open to explore multiple meanings than those who preferred art that was beautiful. In addition, for those who specifically stated that art's purpose was to inform, add perspective, reflect upon society, and promote dialogue, struggled less with accepting the art presented as compelling (and therefore worthy of discussion) than those who felt art should promote principally positive feelings. This being said, those who defined art as beautiful did not necessarily fail to make meaning, just as those with open definitions of art did not guarantee meaning would be found. For the few who were unable or were unwilling to find meaning, anger (caused by a significant breach of personal boundaries), cynicism (stemming from mistrust of artist and art world and/or indifference), or lack of knowledge (in this case due a participant's young age) were key disabling factors rather than transgressive art falling outside of stated art definitions.

Participants stated definitions of what art is and what art is not, were also generally consistent the acceptance or rejection of each piece's artistic validity. Most participants granted presented them artistic status, in spite of their like or dislike of them. This open acceptance of transgressive art as 'art' resonated with common sentiments voiced by the majority of participants; principally that they did not feel they had the right to call something 'not art', if someone else believed it to be art. In retrospect, I wonder now if I

had not introduced the pieces in question as art, if opinions on their 'artness' would have changed. Regardless, it appears that most participants believed that art can be repulsive, offensive, or anxiety inducing as long as it also possesses redeeming features, such as "it stops and makes you think" or "it opens up a discussion." For those who denied particular pieces art status, it was more difficult to extract why they felt this way. One participant, who felt two out of three pieces were not art, simply stated that "I feel off track with this piece, I think the artist is on a different incline than I am" and "it doesn't appeal to me at all." This may be directly tied to this participant's earlier statements about art expectations, where he stated, "Art can evoke emotions. It makes people feel good and takes away feelings of anger and frustration. It should have an aesthetic quality, beauty in my mind." One participant who also felt two out of three pieces were not art, appeared to contradict her earlier definition. To begin, she stated, "Art must have a purposeful design" and "It makes people think, whether it's controversial or not." Later, when asked if a piece was art, she stated, "I don't consider this art. It's very controversial." Thus in some cases, strong negative responses may override earlier assertions.

While it is unclear if exposure to transgressive art had an impact on the definition of art for the majority of participants whose definition was already quite broad, one participant expressed a marked expansion of not only art definitions, but a possible revision of art preferences. At the beginning of the interview, Sarge declared a strong affinity to aesthetic art or "pretty things." After viewing and discussing *Helena*, Sarge appeared to revise this perspective by stating, "Maybe my view of art is very narrow. This is interesting... that's maybe the good thing about challenging art. You can walk

away and it shifts your perspective more than when someone puts dots on the canvas of people enjoying an afternoon along the riverbank. You know, I could walk away and become a vegetarian because of that piece of art, so sitting here and talking about it I've changed my mind. It's got a holy (large impact). This is the most compelling of the three (pieces). It will stay with me the longest." Thus in this instance, one participant's engagement with transgressive art shifted her perspective away from placing primary value on traditional representational pieces (such as those depicting people enjoying an afternoon along a riverbank) to reconsider the worth of art that is adversarial, unaesthetic, and emotionally challenging.

### **Those Who Were Unable or Unwilling to Make Meaning**

Evidence uncovered by this research indicates that even viewers with broad habits of artistic expectation have limits that can be breached by works of art that problematizes specific subject matter. For those moments when a viewer rejects a work of art as being unjustifiable, the viewer often reveals (or implies) rejection as stemming directly from a valued self-position. Cindi's response to *Helena* was strong and passionate. She, as an animal lover, could not see past the potential for animal cruelty and thus rejected it soundly as morally unjustifiable. Her sureness of this stand stifled open dialogue, for to consider other perspectives would require the suspension of closely guarded beliefs. To find meaning in *Helena* would require that she momentarily consider that *some* insights are worth sacrificing the life of another creature, and for Cindi this was unthinkable. When comparing Cindi's response to those participants who were able to find meaning in *Helena*, those participants *were* willing to accept (some for

just a short moment) that potential loss of a goldfish was of secondary importance to the truth the installation may reveal. Cindi's refusal to suspend this value does not indicate closed-mindedness; it simply exposes a line that she will not cross. By extension, as transgressive taboo art troubles values related to children, animals, death, national loyalty, religious faith, among others, there will be pieces that are passionately rejected by some viewers. This rejection can not only preclude dialogue, but also reinforce perspectives as demanded by the value set(s) of essential self-position(s). In these instances, I feel the artist and the art world must see viewer's outrage as not only emotional and instinctual but also reasonable and valid. While dialogue with such individuals has the potential to be distressing, confrontational, and highly charged, both those who are willing to accept the art in question and those who are not have a great deal to learn from each other, as opposing perspectives can offer valuable insight into the nature of the piety being breached.

Another participant who did wish to find meaning was Paul who appeared to be cynical towards transgressive art and avant-garde artists in general. I regretfully admit that cynicism is quite often a lucid response to much of transgressive art, in particular artworks that hides an ill conceived or under developed premises behind an extravagant presentation. For example, some works' first priority is to psychologically provoke the viewer without an underlying pedagogic purpose. Others ignore currently held values in favour of trivialising tragic events and/or stirring up painful memories or histories that have already been transcended. Most common however, are those pieces whose violent or shocking nature is accompanied by a trivial political or philosophical message. One example of this includes the artist Rick Gibson who

planned in 1990 to publicly kill a rat by crushing it under a concrete block in protest of rats beings sold as snake food. While this installation is attempting to suspend morality in order to examine morality, the profundity of rats being fed to snakes is not compelling enough to justify the act of violence. Lamentably, transgressive art world (including 'art that plays with art's rules', taboo and politically irreverent art) is full of misguided examples of conceptual weakness. Cynicism may arise to act as a barrier to protect the viewer from meaningless psychological disturbance. This same cynicism also however cripples the viewer's engagement with those pieces that may be worthy of consideration. In this light, education in transgressive art demands guidelines to discern that which has pedagogic potential from that which has little. Of course this is a complex task, for each viewer has different limits, making pedagogic criteria a somewhat personal construct.

Another participant appeared to embody those viewers who have become acclimatized to the outrageousness of contemporary art, and thus appeared apathetic towards two of the three pieces. Francesca's indifference, a form of cynicism, is a response identified in Julius' 2003 *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* as a benchmark for the death of the genre. Here, he states that art that relies on shock or surprise quickly loses its power. While a viewer must become somewhat acclimatized to the piece prior to receiving its wisdom, shock can serve to detract the viewer away from its pedagogic intent and thus can reinforce cynicism and apathy (p. 209). This lack of engagement and/or interest serves to further distance the general public viewer from the contemporary art world, catching it in a downward spiral of arrogance on the part of the art world and scorn on the part of the viewer. Julius posits that this leaves

transgressive art vulnerable to a backlash that will silence it in the new millennium. While certainly a backlash (often ignited by the popular media) is ever present, it appears that transgressive taboo art and those who push artistic boundaries will never cease to question internalized cultural codes. Of course education for both viewers and prospective artists can play a powerful role in transgressive art's evolution, as dialogic engagement with transgressive art has the capacity to reveal "ever new ways to mean" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 346). Thus educationally based inquiries into transgressive art may not only improve the complexity and pedagogic potential of art being produced, but provide viewers the tools to critically interpret and evaluate it.

Lily's young age placed her at a disadvantage when it came to making meaning of *Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross* as she did not recognise the image of Osama Bin Laden, nor was she comfortably aware of his purported role in the 9/11 attacks. As a former high school teacher, I know that it is not uncommon for young people to lack general historical and/or political knowledge. This simple but overlooked consideration illustrates that simply being unaware of established socio-cultural beliefs and/ or espoused theories of truth renders questions about those beliefs meaningless. Thus the presence or absence of background knowledge must be considered when exposing novice viewers to culturally provocative works. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for an art educator to ensure that his/her students have adequate exposure to historical and political perspectives. It is here where Lily herself offered the solution. Although she lacked aspects of political knowledge, she did make a significant connection to *Helena* by referencing another art installation. "This makes me think another art exhibit that I've heard of. I can't remember the artist's name, but what she

did was she set up a table in a gallery and lay down on the table and sat beside her a loaded gun, condoms, and pills. They could shoot her in the head, and they could liquefy the fish. So it (*Helena*) is also all about the audience power and the potential for violence.” Lily was referring to the 1974 transgressive taboo installation by the Yugoslavian artist Marina Abramovic. In a series of installations, Abramovic invited the audience to do whatever they wanted to her for 6 hours with objects laid out on a table, which included scissors, condoms, a whip, and a loaded gun. “People cut her clothes off, stuck rose thorns in her stomach as some women wiped tears away from her eyes” (Berry, 2010). By citing such a fitting correlation between the two installations, Lily, who was quite soft spoken up until point in the interview, spoke with enthusiasm and authority on this installation, making deep connections that many of the elder participants did not. Thus, it would appear that exposure to various transgressive works may positively enhance the meaning making process as it reinforces the fundamental connections and similarities that exist between all forms of art.

## Chapter Six: Research Conclusions

Transgressive taboo art's aesthetic lies in its ability to evoke meaningful discourse. In its strongest forms, it does not entreat or indoctrinate, nor does it provide answers. Rather, it simply asks a question, poses a problem, or troubles the status quo with the pedagogic resolve to "lead us out from an established habit of mind" (Kegan, 1994, p. 232). It offers freedom from the socio-cultural perceptions that shape our habitus, but it does so at a psychological cost. This cost is the discomfort that comes when we disturb tacit personal and socio-cultural constructs that we consciously or unconsciously accept and sustain. In essence, transgressive taboo art is an epistemological tool that provides a supplementary way to critically examine our personal biases and encultured distortions.

This research sought to uncover how viewers make meaning of transgressive taboo art with the ultimate aim to better inform educators who wish to explore this complex genre with their students. It revealed several key insights.

### **Willingness**

To begin, the path to meaning making is largely determined by the viewers' willingness to engage with art that may provoke in them feelings of anger, disgust, or anxiety. For most viewers, strong negative initial emotional responses do not cripple meaning making as long as they participate actively in dialogue that openly examines the 'reality' presented by the work in question. In addition, positive initial emotional responses do not assure that the viewer will make deep connections or experience

transformative learning. Again, the viewers' willingness to critically explore personal and socio-cultural beliefs is vital to the depth of new understandings. For those who do not actively engage with the art and/or allow themselves to question habits of mind, understandings are often narrow, reverberating only within the tight constraints of well guarded constructs. Such meaning making is often cursory and/or limited to literal suppositions.

### **The Process of Making Meaning through Discourse**

Sincere and invested discourse on any disorienting dilemma can lead to new understandings. For many viewers these understandings are actualized via open dialogue, as they look to others' input to help them test ideas and co-create possible meanings. Viewers also engage in various forms of inner dialogue, as they explore their thoughts and weigh possible truths in relation to their emotional response and self-positions. When first exposed to transgressive taboo art, the exchange begins with the viewer intuitively responding to the work's visual elements and/or premise. If the viewer is willing to explore the art further, he/she may either attempt to use expressive elements in order to speculate on the artist's intent and/or begin the process of organizing visual elements to construct a theory of meaning from the perspective of his/her self-position(s). Often these approaches are coloured (but not necessarily hindered) by his/her emotional response.

As the work in question is verbally and/or mentally explored, its meaning often moves outward from initial emotion response and self-position to explore larger frames of reference such as symbolic, experiential and general world connections. If the viewer

approaches art directly, assigning themselves as the principal constructor of meaning, the work may reveal new information such as an unexpected proclivity and/or a contradiction relating to his/her value system. At this point, the viewer may or may not further explore this incongruity. To do so has both costs (the discomfort of dissonance) and rewards (new understandings of self as perspectives and habits of expectation broaden). This is one point where transgressive taboo art's transformative potential is realized, for when grappling with new information the viewer may develop new and/or adjusted criteria for evaluating the truth and/or the morality of dearly held beliefs. Through this process, viewers may also revise their self-position (however slightly), in the light of new personal insights. As an additional emanation, exposure to and acceptance of this transformational process within the art context may hone viewer aptitude to critically reflect upon internalized cultural codes beyond the art context. Despite variations in actualized costs and rewards, critical self-reflection via verbal and/or mental dialogue appears vital to working past reactionary censure and to explore alternate frames of reference.

### **Artist Message**

While viewers use visual elements to generate theories of meaning about transgressive taboo art, strategies such as narration play a very minor role. This is a distinct departure from research addressing how viewers make sense of non-transgressive works of art. Instead of creating short storylines as a strategy to explore visual content, viewers of transgressive taboo art synthesis emotional and intuitive reactions, explicit and implicit metaphoric offerings, with experiential knowledge and

self-position in order to work through theoretical statements that they feel the artist/artwork may be addressing.

As earlier stated, many viewers begin their verbalized hypotheses by directing attention towards uncovering the political, spiritual, philosophical, or psychological standpoint of the artist. Transcript evidence reveals that many viewers regard artist intent as the 'answer' to the puzzle presented by the work and believe if they correctly synthesize the visual elements this answer may become evident. In many regards, this approach hinders critical reflection and transformational learning in that the viewer is absorbed in 'getting it right' rather than seeing themselves as the principal constructors of meaning. But why do so many begin the interpretive process by focusing on the artist? Perhaps this mindset is due to a pervasive approach towards art taught in schools, as Dennis Atkinson (2006) noted in his article "What is Art Education: New Narratives of Learning". In it, Atkinson points to art being taught as a means of expression, as art teachers commonly encourage students to communicate what they feel, see, and think through art (p. 111). He believes this sets students up for passivity once they enter the contemporary art world as they now see the meaning of others' artwork tied directly to the creators' subjectivities.

### **Viewer as Creator of Meaning**

Other viewers engage directly with the art, discounting the artist's message as less relevant to the meaning making process. This standpoint allows viewers to see the works in question as open, flexible and dynamic. They see the art as asking them a question and that the answer may take many directions. This outlook not only frees

viewers from trying to guess the artist's original intent, but allows them to view art as a personally valuable tool that may encourage them to freely consider personally relevant possibilities within a theoretical context. For nearly all viewers, this approach was a logical and eventual stage reached during the interpretive process. Such an adaptation indicates that while some viewers expect the artist to communicate with them, they also realize that this message is often vague and/or distant, prompting them to soften or abandon this ineffectual approach. In essence, viewers are far less able to engage in authentic reflective interaction and/or reach new and personally meaningful insights if they solely focused on uncovering the artist's intent. If however, they do not attempt or eventually desert this approach, transformative insight is more likely, but not a given.

While knowledge or speculation of the artist's original intent can detract from critically reflective interpretation, it can have a place in the transgressive taboo art experience. For example, when a viewer's approach is to speculate on the artist's intent and their intuitive response is highly negative, they may feel cognitively and emotionally paralyzed. Often these viewers are overwhelmed with the question 'Why?' to such a point that they cannot engage with the art, despite a desire to understand. Introducing artist intent can help provide a foothold upon which they may begin an evaluation and critique. While this 'leg up' is reinforcing the role of artist intent, it is also allowing the viewer to draw meaning from an artistic experience rather than walking away feeling assaulted by it. This research also revealed that many viewers, while satisfied with their personal interpretations, were very curious about the artist and his/her intent. Informing them of the artist intent after viewers have explored on their own appeared to complete the cycle for many, leaving them with a sense of closure.

While this mindset may again place undue importance on the artist's intent, I feel most viewers felt that their meanings and personal connections were at least as profound as that of the artist.

### **Art Expectations and Personal Limitations**

Although viewers' art preferences, the roles art plays in their lives and in society, and how they define art, impact their openness and willingness to engage with art that is transgresses taboo boundaries, personal limitations exist within the rubrics. This limit is often closely tied to the self-position and beliefs and values associated with it. For instance, those who are deeply religious may find art that questions the sacredness of their beliefs impossible to engage with. Those who are deeply patriotic may refuse to find meaning in work that appears berate or insult their country's flag. Such limits are highly individual and appear not to be predictable or tied directly to habits of artistic expectation. For example, I feel I have a very open view towards transgressive taboo art (being an artist who works with human and animal remains), however I would have an exceptionally difficult time with artwork that explores the sexuality and/or sensuality of children. This limit may be amplified my self-position as an elementary school teacher. The complex and instinctively protective temperament of this self-position could not nor would not allow me to momentarily suspend the belief that this theme has merit, and therefore my engagement with art that explored this theme would be brief and damning. I feel limitations such as these, must be respected by artists and curators for perhaps no other reason than we all have them. This does not however mean that I agree with censorship of such art, as long as pedagogic potential is present.

## Summary of Research Findings

This research reveals that viewers approach transgressive taboo art as a hybrid that is both a work of art and a disorienting dilemma. Perhaps due to an acceptance of wide parameters in which art may be defined, viewers do respond to transgressive taboo art with judgements of taste, comments on colour and composition, and exploration of metaphor, as they would with more traditional art forms. Viewers also respond emotionally to the dilemma the artwork suggests and if willing to engage in critical discourse, respond intellectually to the problem position that the artwork offers. The depth of intellectual engagement appears tied to the relinquishment of artist message in favour of viewer-art connections. If viewers do not relinquish the pursuit of the artist message, they are often left with half developed theories meant to expose the artist's subjectivity and/or motivations. If the pursuit of the artist message is relinquished, viewers unconsciously or consciously commence critical discourse from an established (or newly realized) self-position. This position's value set(s) appear to be the foundation basis that emotional, theoretical, and analytical engagement emerges. For those who are willing to critique value sets, explore personal contradictions and question encultured 'givens', transformative understandings may be reached. For those who do not critically reflect upon these value sets or acknowledge personal inconsistencies, realizations are often cursory and/or passing. Within this paradigm are those who are unwilling or unable to participate in the critical examination of specific disorienting dilemmas. For some, the problem position brought about by questioning or suspending certain values cannot be entertained within the paradigm of their self-position. For others, elements of cynicism, indifference, or ignorance stymie

the meaning making process. While viewers' habits of artistic expectations do predict levels of openness to transgressive taboo art's pedagogy, highly valued self-positions (and the value sets that these positions hold) can override artistic tolerance. Insights into the circumstances by which transgressive taboo art successfully (or unsuccessfully) is able to initiate discourse and widen perspectives has yielded specific recommendations for optimal inclusion of this genre within an educational context. Additional theoretical insights into the challenges of this proposal as well as specific recommendations are outlined in the following section.

## Chapter Seven:

### Transgressive Art in an Educational Setting

How one would go about exploring the pedagogic potential of transgressive taboo art at the upper secondary and post-secondary classroom is not without considerable complexity, as levels of educational and artistic freedom are bound by each teacher's constituency of students, parents and administrators. When evaluating the costs, benefits, and cautions of including transgressive art into the secondary classroom, Lee Emery's (2002) article "Censorship in Contemporary Art Education", David Henley's (1997) article "Art of Disturbation: Provocation and Censorship in Art Education", and E. Louis Lankford's (1994) article "Freedom and Outrage in Art Education" offer parallel rationales. While each researcher sees inherent value in including transgressive art into the classroom as a means to "...spark meaningful dialogue" (Lankford, p 56), "...teach real life issues that are the substance of much contemporary art" (Emery, p.7), as well as to encourage students to take their art to greater level of "...control, subtlety, complexity and insight" (Henley, p 43), each article also touches on the difficulties that art educators may face when including art that is controversial into art classes. Whereas Lankford and Emery discuss the difficulties of navigating public expectations and sensibilities, and the profound risk of offending students and other members of the teacher's constituency, Henley discusses how one might judiciously handle students whose maturity is not yet able to meaningfully cope with the complexities of transgressive art. Such difficulties do not stop at secondary school. Ann Elias's (2005) article "Moral Conflict, Cultural Pluralism, and Contemporary Visual Arts Education"

describes a scenario that took place at the Sydney College of Arts where students were disturbed and offended by contemporary art presented in their art classes. Despite the “culture of dissonance” (p. 40) encouraged by the college, several students felt a strong moral conflict with art selections that could be defined as transgressive taboo art, including work by Orlan, Mapplethorpe, Serrano, and Jake and Dinos Chapman. As a consequence of this strong student reaction, the learning and teaching practices at the Sydney College of Arts were altered, a change that Elias and other professors vehemently opposed.

Although forever soothing the misunderstandings between the art, the artist, and the viewer (student or otherwise) would dampen the valuable discourse that emerges from these conflicts, if discourse is rife with hostility and close-mindedness, the likelihood of transformative learning and pedagogic exchange is remote. Understanding the process that individuals go through when constructing meaning from transgressive taboo art revealed by this research can inform teachers how they may better guide the process of critical reflection with their students. Additionally, understanding the lines of reasoning that individuals go through that shut down meaningful exchanges may also help educators prepare students for the conflicted process that they may undergo when viewing transgressive taboo art inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, students who are meta-aware of the approaches to interpretation uncovered by this research may be encouraged to reframe transgressive taboo art as an invitation/challenge rather than a confrontation/assault.

There are many compelling reasons to include well-selected transgressive taboo artworks within the upper secondary and post-secondary visual art classroom. By engaging in dialogue on meaningful interpretation and informed art criticism, students will be exposed to a rich array of possible perspectives, problems, and realities. Habitual examination of both intrapersonal and interpersonal practices and the impact of hegemonic control allow students sharpen their reasoning skills, enabling them to meaningfully cope with subsequent events that challenge their personal ideologies. As well, by providing students with opportunities to engage with a variety of well-chosen art that seeks to resist unspoken beliefs, values, and traditions, students may be inspired to create artwork that examines elements such as hypocrisy, cultural mythology, and the passive acceptance of hegemonic values, and thus prepare them for a lifetime of artistic expression and/or contemporary art patronage. Of course, including transgressive art in any art program is dangerous ground for any teacher to transverse. Cautious introductions, judicious art selection, and a great deal of pre-teaching and preparation are needed, but the benefits may be vast. By following Arbuthnot & Faust's (1981) concept of 'disequibration', transgressive art has the potential to stimulate students' cognitive development, not only by internal and external discourse but also by extending their levels of tolerance and by challenging their views of the world.

## **Recommendations for Incorporating Transgressive Taboo Art into an Educational Setting**

**Art with Pedagogic Potential.** When teachers choose transgressive taboo art to introduce students to, several conditions should be considered. First, the art itself must have the potential to facilitate a new understanding by revealing alternative criteria for moral reflection. At its best, transgressive taboo art should not preach or sentimentalise, but rather it should suggest truths that may take various paths. Some work may question institutions thought to embody morality and goodness, expose repressed instincts and impulses, or explore the human tendency of contradiction and irrationality. Other work may force unusual or unexpected associations upon us, highlight our reliance on custom and tradition, or question our moral positions by suggesting new perspectives. Whichever the work examines, it should create a conflict or dilemma worthy of dialogue and critical reflection.

**Artist Sincerity and Intent.** While artist intent and artist sincerity may be considered when choosing transgressive taboo art to present, students' knowledge of these factors are not vital to its criticism. While selecting work for this research, I often found artwork that had pedagogic potential but was unsupported by a strong or sincere artist statement or commentary. Such work illustrates that power of the art can vastly surpass the meaning the creator assigns to it. As a transgressive taboo artist myself however, I found the lack of an underlying sincere concept quite disappointing, as though these pieces (although quite powerful in their own right) had a disappointing emptiness. Although I did not intend to reveal the artists' intents during the interview

process, I chose to include work that possessed artist sincerity as I felt I wanted to work presented to be powerful, troubling, but also vindicable. During the final stages of the interview (after the hiatus), I did summarize the artist intent of the pieces chosen for this research for those participants who asked. For some, this information reinforced their interpretations, for others it expanded it. In retrospect, I am very glad to have chosen works with sincerity and strong underlying concepts, for to end this exchange with a puerile statement of intent would have been an affront to the participants' own effort and sincerity.

As stated, artist intent is simply one aspect to evaluating a work's pedagogic potential. This research reveals that many participants begin the interpretive process by attempting to guess at the artist's intent. If this answer is not forthcoming, the vast majority abandon or soften this strategy to focus directly on how the work relates to their subjectivities. As Anderson (1988) suggests it is prudent to withhold artist statements or official interpretations until well after viewers have engaged in dialogue, fully exploring the works on question. I feel this will not only avoid the sense that the artist intent is 'the answer'; it may also instill the art expectation that the communication is primarily art-viewer rather than artist-viewer, thereby placing the viewer as the primary constructor of meaning. This 'viewer as principal meaning maker' may well enhance pedagogic exchange as new information that may affect or enhance self-position is more readily accessed.

**Discomfort and Dialogue.** Students should understand the dynamics behind viewer discomfort. Often exposure to transgressive taboo art unsettling, as the art

strikes out at precious socio-cultural constructs challenging what is sacred and what is profane, what is true and what is false, and what is right and what is wrong. To feel discomfort is not necessary or required, but merely a sign that the questions the art is asking are problematizing our particular world-view. Meta-awareness of this dynamic does not however mean however those students whose limits are breached should be excused from dialogue. Rather they should engage deeply in dialogue to not only better understand the nature of the self-position, social category, and/or personal interest that the artwork has breached, but also allow for the possible flexing of those limits as new perspectives are brought forth (Cell, 1984, p.204).

To encourage the presence of interactive and exploratory learning between and among all students, an atmosphere of open dialogue must exist within the classroom setting which includes an air of tolerance towards one another's limits. Therefore, discourse must be lead by the teacher in such a way that the community of learners (which include the teacher) welcome difference, invite opinion, and explore one another's point of view. It is through such participatory solving of artistically posed problems, that students weigh the verisimilitude of others' assertions, while recursively considering the validity of their own perspectives (Mezirow, 1990, p.354). In addition, because we all have slightly different levels to which we absorb hegemonic influence, discourse in which participants express reluctance to accept cultural 'givens' may encourage others to gain distance from the hegemonic framework (Kennedy, 1982, p.100). This divergence of interpretation allows participants to hold conflicting ideas side by side, and in so doing, forces the consideration of meaningful connections between them (Cell, 1984, p. 204). Even those who resist or reject particular artistic

questions have valuable insight to share as the art in question has challenged a belief that they may feel does not warrant justification. Through dialogue these individuals are pushed to respond to the meaning of the work rather than reacting concretely to the work itself (Culbert, 1974, p.88). This may challenge those who feel certain truths are absolute to consider that knowing is uncertain and dependent on context (Kitchener & King, 1990, p 163-165).

**Art to Art Connections.** As noted previously, viewers must have adequate general knowledge for critical reflection to occur. Although it would be difficult to ensure that student viewers have myriad of historical and political experience to explore transgressive taboo art that reference such values, having a background in a variety of art, both transgressive and non-transgressive would allow students to draw connections between the interrelated world of art and its practice of exploring aspects of humanity. Such art world knowledge would also promote an air of civil and informed dialogue regarding transgressive taboo art, as well as mollify hastily reached cynicism. Artistic background such as this can be built by exposing students to historical examples of artistic transgression and ensuing their scandals. This exposure would help students to understand the nature of artistic transgression and how it has impacted the art world. It would also serve to expose the way in which society often reacts and then over time, expands its limits of acceptability. In addition to historical accounts of transgressive artistic practices, students should be presented with artwork that could fall under various contemporary transgressive taboo approaches such as: questioning of 'moral' institutions, exposing repressed instincts, exploring irrational elements of human nature, reversing or equating cultural defined hierarchical

opposites, challenging the validity of received wisdom, creating new realities unbound by rules, etc. In addition, it would be valuable to examine the above approaches as they challenge socio-cultural constructs related to such topics as death, innocence, sexuality, nationhood, beauty, excrement, religion, etc. Another worthy method would be to introduce students to contemporary transgressive taboo artists' oeuvres. Artists often create interrelated pieces that invite the viewer (and the artist him/herself) to a more in depth exploration of a particular theme or value. While educators may choose to approach transgressive art in numerous ways, I believe that examining it systematically will not only help to reign in a genre that can appear to be fragmented and chaotic, but also tap into students' general art knowledge.

**Art Criticism.** Art interpretation and criticism is not self-evident. Most viewers have strong opinions on the art they like and do not like, but few novice viewers have the language or methodology to approach art that they are unfamiliar with in a clear purposeful way. Such a framework would serve to slow down reactionary judgements and allow viewers to thoroughly explore the work before branding it as profound or dismissing it as folly. Exposure to the fundamental principles of interpretation found in Terry Barrett's (1993) article "Principles for Interpreting Art" and his follow up article "About Art Interpretation for Art Education" (2000) would give students several guiding principles for connecting to not only transgressive taboo art, but art in general. Several of Barrett's principles may be of special interest to educators who broach transgressive taboo art with their students. In both articles, Barrett encourages students to see the art in question in its best rather than worst light, to avoid speculating on the personality (or pathology) of the artist, to avoid narrow declarations of meaning, and to be aware that

interpretations can be “different, competing, and contradictory” (Barrett, 2000, p. 6). His principles also instill the notion that art interpretation need not correspond to the artist’s original intent. This last point may be a difficult habit to break, as many see the artist’s original intent as inextricably tied to the deliberate plan or design that defines it as art. While this is cannot be denied, I believe in time and with repeated practice, students can come to see that the artist’s original intent is only one possibly; one small slice of an artwork’s potential meaning.

At the beginning of this research’s interviews process, many viewer participants expressed anxiety about their unfamiliarity with art interpretation. Many feared I would simply show them a work of art and then immediately ask what that artwork meant. To slow down the interpretive process into specific steps, I endeavoured to give these novice viewer participants a structure upon which they could comfortably unravel possibilities. For such an outline, I turned to Tom Anderson’s (1993) article “Defining and Structuring Art Criticism for Education”, who, as previously mentioned, categorizes the stages of art criticism into description, interpretation, and criticism. Based on this research I would revise this model to include two more steps or processes I feel are relevant to the criticism of transgressive taboo art. It should be noted that this model is merely one example of many possible configurations, and that practical classroom experience may reveal far superior methods to guide novice viewers through the often perplexing process of finding meaning in transgressive taboo art.

Step 1: Emotional Response. As transgressive taboo strives to be emotionally evocative, viewer’s emotional response must be addressed as a relevant part of the

total meaning making process. Articulating (or mentally acknowledging) emotional response(s) will force viewers to recognize their existence, name them, and work to consciously account for their presence. Acknowledgment also enables viewer to track emotional shifts that during the meaning making process, as well as attend to the impact these shifts may have on direction(s) the meaning making may take. As an added benefit, attending to the visceral response provoked by visual art may also inspire students to see the work as personally significant (either positively or negatively) to their self-position and thus begin to see that the art's possible meanings (and all of the related questions it asks), is primarily about *them*.

Step 2: Description. Immediately following a short discussion regarding viewers' emotional response, viewers should verbally (or mentally) survey the art in question for content, technique, colour, and mood. This would acclimatize the viewer to the pieces' disturbing visual elements, draw focus to other, more understated visual aspects, as well as tie those visual attributes to a larger more holistic concept. I believe many viewer participants in this research saw this as a non-threatening task, and thus became not only confidence building, but served to build verbal momentum.

Step 3: Interpretation and Analysis. Using visual elements found in the description, viewers begin to explore possible meanings based on metaphor, intuition, real world understandings and experience. Dialogue at this stage is instrumental, as viewers may alter, build upon, or expand theories of meaning based upon interactions between their and others' perceptions and imaginations. Dialogue during this stage will also likely reveal equally viable but fundamentally different problem positions the piece may be

asking. This variety can be based upon the range of self-positions that are present and genuinely participating. The educator's role is important during this process to encourage students to engage one another with reciprocal open-mindedness and civility. "Consensus is not important, but authentic discussion is" (Bowers, 2005, p.370). Authentic dialogue in this sense is dialogue that has no predetermined outcome, where questions are asked that have manifold answers and participants are sincere when accessing various self-positions and are tolerant of others' perspectives. Respectful civility aside, this stage of the interpretive process may also be filled with heated debate. Bakhtin (1981) notes that interaction that is filled with conflict and tension can be highly transformative, stating; "the importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individuals coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous" (p. 348). Encouraging debate yet discouraging intimidation and verbal bullying must be addressed by educators as needed. To offset possible escalating conflict between participants, agreed upon 'rules of engagement' may be necessary.

Step 4: Critical Reflection. During and after interactive discourse, students would benefit from meaningful self-reflection upon the new information and understandings that have come to light. Students may ask such questions as:

1. When you were first exposed to the work in question, were you able to trace your emotional response to a self-position? Or did your emotional response fall outside of the 'self you believe to be true'?
2. Did your emotional response impact meaning making process? If so, how so?

3. Did dialogue reveal new understandings and/or alternate perspectives that make sense in this context?
4. Did this art piece confirm (or call into question) aspects of personal value system(s)? Did others' perspectives reinforce (or call into question) what you feel is/was a 'given' truth?
5. Through dialogue were you able to suspend judgement regarding a commonly held viewpoint or morality in order to re-evaluate its value? Can you trace the origins of this belief to a particular influence or aspect of your life such as religious upbringing, media impact, or social enculturation?
6. Did the discussion expose distortions of self or society that you may have been aware of but had not addressed? If you have addressed this distortion, how did this artwork contribute to your thoughts on this?
7. Did this piece and the dialogue transpired create a new reality or expose possible truths, and will this new knowledge impact your perspective and/or your self-position, and if so in what ways?

Of course such questions should be adjusted to reflect the socio-cultural values the artwork is problematizing, the context, as well as the individuals involved.

Step 5: Evaluation. It is hoped that with exposure and repeated interaction with art, participants will not focus on the 'artness' of the piece, but rather evaluate the piece's pedagogic aspects. Of course this evaluation is directly tied to the quality of the discourse, and in many ways such an evaluation is very much directed towards self and the participants involved. For example, if the dialogue was of poor quality

with conclusions being shallow and close-minded, even art with high pedagogic potential will fall flat. This is not to say that evaluations are unrelated to the depth or quality of art's underlying concept. Merely that open authentic and informed discourse and a sincere attempt at critical self-reflection are needed prior to praising the work as enlightening or dismissing it as weak.

## **Conclusion**

Transgressive taboo art offers students the raw materials to begin critical discourse on socio-cultural value systems along with an opportunity to engage in reflections regarding their self-position within this larger context. For transgressive taboo art to be accepted within the educational realm, educators must not only choose artwork judiciously but also prepare their students for the emotional impact that the artwork may evoke. Successful inclusion of transgressive taboo art is highly dependent on the maturity of the students. Some upper secondary students may be ready to critically reflect on cherished values, while others may find clearly articulating (or defending) emotionally charged perspectives highly stressful. In addition, some post-secondary students may lack the maturity to openly and respectfully consider alternate perspectives, while others may greatly benefit from exploration beyond their levels of comfort. Clear expectations via the syllabus along with the student ability to opt in or out would certainly help to avert misunderstandings that may arise from the educator's constituents that include administrators, parents, and the students themselves. Regardless of practical challenges, transgressive taboo art has much to offer. For those students who are willing and ready, personal insights that come from artistic

interrogation of commonly held values and beliefs can provide the foundational tools to critically evaluate a vast array of myth-based suppositions and tradition-based assumptions that they will face throughout their lives.

### **Further Research**

Certainly transgressive taboo art is a rich and largely unexplored artistic genre that lends itself well for further research. Of interest would be to explore the complex nature of creative processes undertaken by those who produce transgressive taboo art. As a transgressive taboo artist myself, I have experienced several distinct and unique struggles that come with doing 'challenging' art which traditional artists may not experience. These include coping with opposing self-positions, negative typecasting brought about by viewer misunderstanding, as well as real world repercussions. It may be interesting to examine the creative and psychological underpinnings of such artists, as well as also explore how their distinctive struggles impact their creative processes.

Of equal interest may be authentic examination of viewers who have mixed responses to troubling art. Often during this research, participants would visibly grimace when first shown works in question, but would then indicate a positive or neutral emotional response. Others would smile and laugh while verbally stating they felt horrified. All of us hold several self-positions that may hold conflicting tenets. When presented with a transgressive taboo work of art, a viewer may view it through different lenses from the sub-categories of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, economic status, and/or political and religious background. Perhaps the mixed responses that were observed during this research are an indication of this conflict, as viewers simultaneously

responded with distinct yet related inner self-positions. Such contradictions were not fully explored during this research, but could be fodder for critical self-reflection on the conflict between self-positions as they relate to art interpretation.

Lastly, when reviewing literature about transgressive art, noted authors Cashell (2009), Peckham (1965), Politsky (1995), and Walker (1999) suggest a therapeutic element to transgressive art. These authors posited that viewers may psychologically benefit from transgressive art as they would be able to experience and explore repressed impulses and desires within a safe context. At no time during this research did participants mention any therapeutic benefits; however such benefits were not specifically queried. Perhaps one reason why some participants were drawn to this study was to indulge particular curiosities. Safe indulgence of dark aspects of our personalities could also account for the high numbers of attendees at transgressive art shows. Research that explores the therapeutic nature of transgressive taboo art would not only be fascinating but also interesting from a pedagogic perspective. Are viewers able to identify a calming or satisfying (or other) component before, during or after viewing transgressive taboo art, and if so what are its dynamics? Do therapeutic aspects (if they exist) play a role in critical reflection of self-position, and if so, does how does it affect the acceptance or rejection of new information that arises from cognitive dissonance? Are therapeutic aspects related to repressed psychological desires such as vicariously lived aggression, sexual curiosity/deviancy, schadenfreude, voyeurism, etc.? The motivation to view transgressive taboo art and payoff viewers receive from the experience would be a fascinating inquiry.

## **Final Note**

There are many avenues within our culture that can provide the raw material for deep reflection and re-evaluation of what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false, and what is moral and what is immoral. Transgressive taboo art is one such avenue that walks the difficult and chaotic line between generating new understandings and destroying old presumptions. Through dialogic participation, learners and educators, viewers and artists can delve into the ambiguity, the complexity, and the perplexing nature of problem posing art to explore and debate distorted ways thinking. In this way, art can come alive to students and instil in them a lifelong connection to contemporary art.

## References

- Anderson, T. (1993). Defining and structuring art criticism for education. *Studies in Art Education*, 34(4), 199-208.
- Arbuthnot, J.B. & Faust, D. (1981). *Teaching moral reasoning: Theory and practice*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Atkinson, D. (2006). What is art in education? New narratives of learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 39(2), 108-117.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). Discourse in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.) *The Dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (259-422). Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Ball, A. F. & Freedman, S. W. (2004). *Bakhtin perspective on language, literacy, and learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Barrett, T. (1994). Principles for interpreting art, *Art Education*, 47(3), 8-13.
- Berry, N. (2010). Marina Abramovic at MoMA. Retrieved from <http://accessibleartny.com/index.php/2010/03/marina-abramovic-at-moma/>
- Bhabha, H. K. (2001). The subjunctive mood of art. In L. Rothfield (Ed.) *Unsettling sensation: Arts policy lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art controversy* pp. 93-96). New York: Rutgers University Press.
- Bourraïud, N. (2002). *Relational aesthetics*. France: Les Presses du reel.

- Bowers, C.A. (1984). *The promise of theory: Education and politics of cultural change*. New York: Longman & Green.
- Bowers, R. (2005). Freire (with Bakhtin) and the dialogic classroom seminar. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 51(4), 368-378.
- Bracks, P. (2006). *Artist statement*. Retrieved from [http://making-the-empire-cross.com/unleashed/bearded\\_orientals.html](http://making-the-empire-cross.com/unleashed/bearded_orientals.html)
- Brookfield, S.D. (1987). *Developing critical thinkers: Challenging adults to explore alternate ways of thinking*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bruder, K. A. & Uçok, O. (2000). Interactive art interpretation: How viewers make sense of paintings in conversation. *Symbolic Interaction*, 23(4), 337-358.
- Cashell, K. (2009). *Aftershock: The ethics of contemporary transgressive art*. New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Cell, E. (1984). *Learning to learn from experience*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Clark, G.A. & Zimmerman, E. (1978). A walk in the right direction: A model for visual arts education. *Studies in Art Education*, 19(2), 34-49.
- Clements, R.D. (1979). The inductive method of teaching visual arts criticism. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 13(3), 67-78.
- Culbert, S. (1974). *The organizational trap and how we get out of it*. Michigan: Basic Books.
- Cupchik, G. C. & Gebotys, R. J. (1988). The search for meaning in art: Interpretive styles and judgements of quality. *Visual Arts Research*, 14 (2), 38-50.

- Debord, G. (1977). *Society of the spectacle*. Detroit, MI: Black and White.
- Doll, E. W. jr. (1993). Curriculum possibilities in a “post” future. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 8(4), 279-293.
- Dudek, S. (1993). The morality of 20<sup>th</sup> century transgressive art. *Creativity Research Journal*, 6(1), 145-152.
- Dutton, D. (1987). Why intentionalism won't go away. In A. J. Cascardi (Ed.), *Literature and the question of philosophy* (pp. 194-209). Baltimore, MI: John Hopkins University Press.
- Eisner, E. & Vallance E. (1974) Introduction. In Eisner, E. & Vallance E. (Eds.) *Conflicting conceptions of curriculum* (pp.1-9). Michigan: McCutchan.
- Elias, A. (2005). Moral conflict, cultural pluralism, and contemporary visual arts. *Contemporary visual arts Education, the moral minority, and freedom of expression*. Edith Cowan University. Retrieved from <http://www.acuads.com.au/>
- Emery, L (2002). Censorship in contemporary art education. *iJADE*, 21(1), 5-13.
- Featherstone, M. (1995). *Undoing culture: Globalization, post-modernism, and identity*. London: Sage.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Franklin, M. B, Becklen, R. C., & Doyle, C. L. (1993). The influence of titles on how paintings are seen. *Leonardo*, 26(2), 103-108.

- Freedman, K. & Wood, J. (1999). Reconsidering critical response: student judgments of purpose, interpretation, and relationships in visual culture. *Studies in Art Education*, 40(2), 128-142.
- Freeland, C. (1999). *But is it art? An introduction to art theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Goulding, C. (2002). *Grounded theory: A practice guide for management, business, and market researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Graves, L. (1998). Transgressive traditions and art definitions. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56(1), 39-48.
- Gray, D.E. (2004). *Research in the real world*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Hamblen, K. A. (1988). Research in art education as a form of educational consumer protection. *Studies in Art Education*, 31(1), 37-45.
- Harre, R. & Davies, B. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1), 43-63.
- Henley, D. (1997). Art of disturbance: Provocation and censorship in art education. *Art Education*, 5(4), 39-45.
- Hirsch Jr. E.D. (1967). *Validity in interpretation*. London, UK: Yale University Press
- Hofbauer, A. K. (2007). *Marco Evaristti and the open work*. Retrieved from [http://www.evaristti.com/marco/open\\_work.html](http://www.evaristti.com/marco/open_work.html)

- Horn, S. (2006). Inspiration into installation: An exploration of contemporary experience through art. *iJADE*, 25(2), 134-146.
- Irvin, S. (2005). The artist's sanction in contemporary art. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63(4), 315-326.
- Julius, A. (2002). *Transgressions: The offences of art*. London, UK: Thames and Hudson.
- Kammen, M. (2006). *Visual shock: A history of art controversies in American culture*. New York: Random House.
- Kardon, J. (1988). "A perfect moment" Robert Mapplethorpe. *Institute of Contemporary Art Exhibition Catalogue*, 9-13.
- Kant, I. (1790/2008). *Critique of judgement*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Kennedy, W. B. (1990). Integrating personal and social ideologies. In J. Mezirow (Ed.) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (pp.99-115). California: Jossey Bass.
- Kershaw, B. (1992). *The politics of performance: Radical theatre as cultural intervention*. London: Routledge.
- Kindler, A. M. (2008). Art, creativity, art education and civil society. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 9(2), 1-14.
- Kitchener, K. (1983). Cognition, meta-cognition, and epistemic cognition. *Human Development*, 26(4), 222-233.

- Kitchener, K. & King, P. (1990). The reflective judgement model: transforming assumptions about knowing. In J. Mezirow (Ed.) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (pp.159-176). California: Jossey Bass.
- Koozin, K (1990). *The vanitas still lifes of Harmen Steenwyck: Metamorphic realism*. London: The Edwin Mallen Press.
- Lankford, E. L. (1984), A phenomenological methodology for art criticism. *Studies in Art Education*, 25(3), 151-158.
- Lankford, E. L.(1994). Freedom and outrage in art education. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 28(4), 54-62.
- Lankford, E. L., & Pankratz, D. B. (1992). Justifying controversial art in arts education. *Design for Arts in Education*, 93(6), 17-25.
- Lind, A. & Brzuzy, S. (2008). *Battleground women, gender, sexuality*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Lyotard, J. F. (1979). The post-modern condition: A report on knowledge. *Theory and History of Literature*, 10, University of Minnesota Press.
- McIntyre, T. (2009). *Sideshow hoaxes and artistic freaks: A creepy collection of rogue taxidermy*. Retrieved from <http://www.fieldandstream.com/photos/gallery/hunting/2009/10/sideshow-hoaxes-and-artistic-freaks-creepy-collection-rogue-taxidermy>
- Mecedo, D. (2010). *Art exhibit depicting Jesus in sex act sparks outrage in Colorado*. Retrieved from <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/10/04/outrage-art-exhibit-depicting-jesus-sex-act-boosts-gallery-visits/>

- Meijer, F.G. (2005). *Dutch and Flemish still life paintings*. Oxford, UK: The Ashmolean Museum Oxford.
- Mello, R. (2000). Exploring the artist's pedagogy. *Educational Horizons*, 78(4), 190-193.
- Mezirow, J. (1981). A critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Education*, 32(1), 3-24.
- Mezirow, J. (1990). How critical reflection triggers transformative learning. In J. Mezirow (Ed.) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (pp.1-20). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1990). Conclusion: Towards transformative learning and emancipatory education. In J. Mezirow (Ed.) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (pp.354-376). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Mitchell, W. J.T. (2001). Offending images. In L. Rothfield (Ed.) *Unsettling sensation: Arts policy lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art controversy* (pp.115-133). New York: Rutgers University Press.
- Nodine, C. F., Locher, P. J., & Krupinski, E. A., (1993). The role of formal art training on perception and aesthetic judgement of art compositions, *Leonardo*, 26(3), 219-227.
- Nystrand, M. (1997). *Opening dialogue: Understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Parks, M.E. (1992). The art of pedagogy: Artistic behaviour as a model for teaching. *Art Education*, 45(5), 51-57.

- Parsons, M. J. (1987). Talk about a painting: A cognitive developmental analysis, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 21(1), 27-55.
- Peacock, B. (1984). Manet: False impressions. *Third Way*, 5(2), 10-12.
- Peckman, M. (1965). *Man's rage for chaos: Biology, behaviour and the arts*. New York: Chilton Books.
- Piaget, J. (1954). *The construction of meaning in the child*. New York: Basic Books.
- Piaget, J. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. New York: International University Press.
- Politsky, R.H. (1995). Acts of last resort: the analysis of offensive and controversial art in an age of cultural transition. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 22(2), 111-118.
- Ross, D. (2001). An all too predictable sensation. In L. Rothfield (Ed.) *Unsettling sensation: Arts policy lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art controversy* (pp. 96-103) New York: Rutgers University Press.
- Sanzenbacher, R. (1997). New awareness of the power of dialogue: A hopeful pedagogy. *College Teaching*, 45(3), 104-107.
- Schneider, N. (2003). *Still life*. Italy: Tachen Press.
- Shor, I. (1987). *Fostering critical reflection in adult education: Critical teaching and everyday life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data. *Consumer Research*, 21(3), 491-503.

- Stecker, R. (1994). Art interpretation. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52(2), 193-206.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Walker, C. (1990/1998). Andres Serrano. In G. Harper (Ed.) *Interventions and provocations: Conversations on art, culture, and resistance* (pp.115-124). New York: State University Press.
- Walker, J. A. (1999). *Art and outrage: Provocation, controversy, and the visual arts*. London: Pluto Press.
- Weitz, M. (1956). The role of theory in aesthetics. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art*, 15(1), 27-35.
- Wimsatt Jr., W.K. & Beardsley, M. C. (1978). Intentional fallacy. In J. Margolis (Ed.), *Philosophy Looks at the Arts* (pp. 367-380). Philadelphia, PN: Temple University Press.
- Yokey, S. (1999). Embracing a critical pedagogy. *Art Education*, 52(5), 18-24.
- Zemblas, T. (2004). Controversial works of art: Some notes on public conflicts. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 3(3), 385-407.

## **Appendix A : Advertisement for Participant Participation**

### **Invitation to Participate in a Study of the Interpretive Process of Transgressive Art.**

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore how viewers make sense of transgressive art. Transgressive art differs from the majority of visual art in that it often challenges the viewers' culturally bound assumptions and traditions. This study will seek to learn more about how people feel, think, and react to art that asks fundamental questions about society and themselves.

What's involved?

Participants will be asked to commit to two interviews, totalling one hour of time. To begin, you will be asked to attend an initial interview of approximately 45 minutes in a public location at a time and date convenient to you. Alternatively, interviews can be conducted over skype. This initial interview will be followed by a follow-up telephone or skype interview 2 to 5 days later, lasting approximately 15 minutes.

You will be shown three pieces of transgressive works of art and be asked questions that will guide you through the interpretive process. After this interview, the researcher will call you and give you the opportunity to add to, change, or revise any of your interpretive statements.

All participants' identities will be kept strictly confidential.

Who's invited?

Adults who have an interest in art, but who do not have post-secondary education in art or art history, are not professionally involved in the arts, nor are artists themselves.

If interested, contact the co-investigator:  
M. Winn, graduate researcher, UBC

## Appendix B: Informed Consent



August 2011

### Research Participant Informed Consent Form

#### Principal Investigator

Dr Rita Irwin  
Professor and Associate Dean, Teacher Education Office  
University of British Columbia

#### Co-Investigator

Miranda Winn  
Graduate Student  
University of British Columbia

#### Purpose

The research study **Beyond Provocation: How Viewers Make Sense of Transgressive Taboo Art** aims to uncover how viewers find meaning in art that challenges commonly held assumptions, values, and beliefs. You are being invited to participate in this study because you have expressed interest in the process of art interpretation.

#### Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, the researchers will contact you to set up a mutually convenient time for you to discuss your expectations of art and to view and interpret three pieces of transgressive art. You will then be contacted two to five days after your initial viewing to engage in a follow-up interview in which you may change any aspect of your interpretation. It is asked that you do not research the presented artwork during this time, as it is felt published criticism may unduly influence your interpretive process. It is expected that the initial interview will take approximately 45 minutes, and the follow-up interview will take 15 minutes.

#### Confidentiality

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be given a pseudonym when the study refers to comments and insights you express.

**Remuneration**

There is no remuneration available for your participation.

**Contact Information about this study**

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Miranda Winn at XXX-XXX-XXXX or xxxx@xx

**Contact for information about the rights of research participants**

If you have any concern about your treatment as a research subject, you can contact the Research Subject Information Line in the University of British Columbia's Office of Research Services at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

**Consent**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time during the process.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this research project, which includes interviews on and about transgressive art. Your signature below also indicates that you have received a copy of the consent form for your records.

---

Signature of participant

---

Date

---

Name of participant (please print)

---

Phone number

---

Email