

I.B. TAURIS

A woman with dark hair and tattoos on her arms is seated, focused on assembling a large jigsaw puzzle. She is wearing a vibrant, multi-colored floral patterned shirt. The puzzle she is working on depicts a town scene with buildings and a river. In the foreground, a glass of tea sits on the puzzle, and a small plate with biscuits is visible. A blue box with the 'sky' logo is also present. The overall scene is lit with warm, indoor lighting.

# AFTERSHOCK

THE ETHICS OF CONTEMPORARY TRANSGRESSIVE ART

KIERAN CASHELL

# Aftershock

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**Kieran Cashell** is Lecturer in Critical and Contextual Studies at the School of Art and Design, Limerick Institute of Technology.

‘Kieran Cashell discusses artists who use everything from soiled bed linens to blood to dead sharks in their works. Drawing on an impressive array of philosophical ideas, Cashell helps viewers tackle the messy details of art by Damien Hirst, Orlan, Marc Quinn, Tracey Emin, and more, as he provides a probing and subtle defence of the moral value of such recent “transgressive” art.’

*Cynthia A. Freeland, Professor & Chair,  
Department of Philosophy, University of Houston, Texas*

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For Rachel and Benjamin  
with all my love

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Finally, as the sole author of this work, I remain responsible for any errors or omissions that may have escaped detection, and for this I apologise in advance.



That coming autumn, the Royal Academy would be staging a most audacious exhibition of the most controversial contemporary British artists. Dorian, who was involved on the publicity side, was in the middle of a planning dinner at Quo Vadis in Soho with the Academy's director, when things began to go awry.

Will Self, *Dorian* (2004)



# O INTRODUCTION

## The Incompatibility of Aesthetics and Contemporary Art

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Certain techniques of shock are embedded in the way we determine right from wrong.

*Jake Chapman*

Contemporary art has caused controversy for its uncompromising and sometimes extremist strategies. Even where these strategies are revealed as necessarily radical interventions in ideological cultural enclaves, or ultimately prove profound in other ways, much that is valued as art remains shocking, disturbing and problematic. Such art has been endorsed with the generic descriptor *transgressive* – suggesting that this art shocks only by virtue of its uncompromising mission to interrogate conservative views and subvert conventional moral beliefs. However, many consider that this mission has become excessive. Transgression ‘goes too far’; it violates the remit of enlightened culture to the extent that it becomes impossible to engage with transgressive practices *as art*.

Yet the fact remains that transgressive practices have genuinely expanded the horizon of artistic expression. Associated with the cultural project of postmodernism, transgressive art (which includes sub-generic tendencies such as *object art*<sup>1</sup>) continues to constitute an important aesthetic force in post-twentieth-century vanguard culture. Professional critics have therefore been faced with a challenge: either support transgression unconditionally or condemn the tendency and risk obsolescence amid suspicions of critical conservatism. This explains the widespread phenomenon that one commentator has correctly diagnosed as the ‘unreflective contemporary endorsement of the transgressive’.<sup>2</sup>

Aesthetic transgression can be defined as any act of violation presented under the alibi of art. More than an aesthetic genre it more accurately nominates



a general ‘oppositional practice’ that includes many sub-genres and assumes a multiplicity of variations.<sup>3</sup> In the most comprehensive *tour de horizon* of transgressive art, Anthony Julius<sup>4</sup> distinguishes the aesthetic of transgression as an art committed to violating socio-consensual, but importantly non-legal, taboos: under the auspices of the ‘constructive nihilism’ of Friedrich Nietzsche and, in the spirit of the ‘expenditure without reserve’ developed in the ‘erotism’ of Georges Bataille, ‘Taboo-breaking artworks put under threat certain under-articulated or unspoken sentiments and beliefs to which their audiences may be taken to adhere.’<sup>5</sup> The threats associated with transgressive art are thus directed at the audience; the viewer is meant to be affected by the violation of taboo symbolised by or enacted in the work.<sup>6</sup>

Bataille defines taboo as one of an economy of prohibitions that outline and protect the structure of the socio-symbolic realm.<sup>7</sup> And given this definition, we can characterise the transgressive act as a perceived assault on rationality. In its pursuit of the ‘irrational’, art has become negative, nasty and nihilistic. Influenced by the dark troika Nietzsche–Freud–Bataille, artists scrutinise what transcends the moral good–evil spectrum by openly ‘discrediting the institutions of morality’,<sup>8</sup> or, in challenging the psychoanalytic theory of sublimation, some artists openly expose and display ‘unconscious’ repressed instincts.<sup>9</sup> Some explore the erotic thrill of the irrational in itself in a disconcertingly indulgent way; some examine practices of destructive, demoralised and vicious impulses for their own sake, unrestrained by any moral constraint or self-critical censure – *le mal pour le mal*.

Thus, when certain artists encourage exposure to pathogenic motifs through an uninhibited exploration of their own traumatic neuroses (Vito Acconci, Janine Antoni and Jana Sterbak) or when they engage in acts of debasement without rationale or purpose (Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy), or when artists appear intent on publicly unleashing libidinous and violent instinctual energy (the *Wiener Actionismus* artists Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl and Gunther Brus), or, finally, when artists inflict elective harm on themselves in a programme of public para-suicidal performances (Bob Flanagan, Marina Abramović or Franco B), we acknowledge the violation of a socio-consensual taboo in the Bataillean sense and recognise that we are dealing with transgressive artistic practices.

Transgression becomes a valued cultural practice, Chris Jenks explains, because the uncompromisingly honest confrontation with the less salubrious aspects of the human condition is assumed, according to a tacit but widespread adherence to atmospheric post-Freudian tropes, to be a healthy social regulative.<sup>10</sup> The burden has fallen on contemporary culture to put in place the creative conditions that make it possible to experience abandonment and excess safely and to give (at least vicarious) expression to the impulsive attraction to the instinctual urge towards the amoral and the irrational involved in this

post-Freudian commitment.<sup>11</sup> Thanks to transgressive art practices, we can experience excess, and identify with possibilities of life liberated from all social constraints and moral judgement, at an acceptable imaginative distance.

Do transgressive cultural practices enable audiences to access neuroses indirectly and, by vicarious experience of violation, become psychologically enriched by the process? As the Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch, director of the Orgiastic Mystery Theatre (founded in 1958) claims, spectacles of horror and sacrifice become cathartic mechanisms for releasing potentially psycho-pathological repressions. ‘Our intellect is repressed energy,’ he says, and inevitably, the drawing out of such repressions is going to appear ‘orgiastic, as violent as it is obscene’.<sup>12</sup> Nitsch assumes, he says, ‘all that appears negative, unsavoury, perverse and obscene, the lust and the resulting sacrificial hysteria, in order to spare YOU the defilement and shame entailed by the descent into the extreme.’<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps this explanation goes some way towards the critical justification of transgressive art’s ‘predatory relation with what is forbidden’.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, art critics have defended the disturbing – unsavoury, perverse *and* obscene<sup>15</sup> – performances of Californian artist Paul McCarthy as not only artistically significant but also enriching, because he enables audiences to experience violent regression vicariously, without becoming directly involved. Similar to the cathartic relationship developed between the agonists of ancient Greek tragedy and their audience, McCarthy acts out his personal traumata in public so we don’t have to. Or perhaps not.

As Cynthia Freeland has observed, this theorisation fails to explain the negative impulse behind transgressive art completely; it fails because, unlike the Dionysian ritual catharsis at the origin of Greek tragedy, there no longer exists a shared community-unifying belief system according to which the transgressive act can arrogate a general socio-cultural value.<sup>16</sup> ‘Many people’, Fenella Critchton agrees, ‘are sceptical as to whether or not it is possible to re-animate those myths at the end of the 20th century.’<sup>17</sup> When Nitsch claims to spare us the defilement of the descent into the extreme, sceptics like Julius can simply counter: ‘no you do not’. For how can we become true participants in such ritual catharsis if there is no consensual agreement as to the value and significance of the transgressive act as required for ritual behaviour?<sup>18</sup> ‘Far from audiences coming to feel part of a group, sometimes they get shocked and abandon the community.’<sup>19</sup> The question therefore remains: just why *has* vanguard art become so nasty and nihilistic?

Addressing this question, Jake Chapman’s recent documentary, *Artshock: Is Bad Art for Bad People?*<sup>20</sup> suggests that post-holocaust society, altered irrevocably by the obscenities witnessed during two world wars, now suffers from a kind of global traumatic neurosis. Referring to the Freudian theory of repression, Chapman proposes that extreme culture emerged in the aftermath of the war as

a kind of public ‘abreactive’<sup>21</sup> therapy, whereby confrontation with the original source of trauma is assumed to result in a kind of beneficial catharsis for the neurotic. He claims that, as shock is used for positive ends in psychoanalytic therapy, so extreme culture tries to shock society out of its paralysing hysteria by cruelly confronting it with ‘de-sublimated’ transgressive imagery.<sup>22</sup>

Certainly, the artists associated with Viennese Actionism, whose performances included public acts of hysterical regression (Brus’s performances included urination and defecation with faecal play as well as acts of self-directed insult including self-mutilation), may appear more reasonable in light of this explanation; Nitsch, as we have seen, defends his spectacles of excess, claiming that it is for cathartic ends that the primordial impulsive darkness repressed in the collective organisation of civilised social existence is ‘unleashed’. Exposing culturally suppressed barbarism can perhaps be defended as necessary for the psychic health of artificially civilised humanity. So, according to this picture, in order to overcome global trauma following the experience of atrocity, it is necessary for the critical project of Western culture to turn antagonistic in order, paradoxically, to preserve the project of affirmative humanism. Therefore, it is only for the sake of the critical principles of culture that art has rejected the traditional affirmative values of culture – and has become, in the process, negative, nasty and nihilistic.<sup>23</sup>

Is this explanation plausible? Certainly, it seems slightly absurd to suggest, for instance, that Paul McCarthy’s artistic programme should be linked to a post-traumatic hangover of collective guilt in the wake of global atrocity. Although there have been repeated attempts to contextualise his transgressive practices in relation to Actionism, what he has appropriated, if anything, from the Viennese Actionists is a simulated mimesis of excess, a *style*.<sup>24</sup> This crucial stylistic aspect of the transgressive aesthetic demonstrates that if it is to be adequately addressed it will become necessary to narrow the field of focus and avoid the ambitious temptation to provide planetary answers to localised questions. In respect of this caveat, I will claim that what contemporary transgressive art – more aggressively than any previous cultural practice – has actively sought to do is *invalidate the principles of institutional aesthetics*. To this end, the principal target of transgressive antagonism will be discovered to be the paradigmatic concept of philosophical aesthetics, namely, the so-called ‘disinterested’ mode of aesthetic contemplation.<sup>25</sup>

## Transgression: The War Against Disinterestedness

Disinterestedness, long considered the fundamental motif of traditional art discourse, has its foundations in the philosophical tradition of the eighteenth century and its associated prioritisation of the category of beauty for aesthetics.<sup>26</sup> As a prescribed aesthetic concept, however, disinterestedness receives its most rigorous analysis in the work of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant who argued in the *Critique of Judgment*<sup>27</sup> (*Kritik der Urteil*, 1790) that a form of contemplation *disengaged* from all practical contexts – and dissociated from all *emotional*, *sexual* or *moral* feelings – is the only objective form of perception appropriate to the rational appreciation of (artistic) beauty.

In order for a judgement of aesthetic value to have universal validity, Kant decided that it must be ‘independent of all interest’.<sup>28</sup> And in the aesthetic context *interest* is identified as any motivation towards the object that involves *desire*.<sup>29</sup> Thus aesthetic appreciation should not be driven by any purposive urge to satisfy an intentional appetite.<sup>30</sup> According to Kant, beauty can become accessible as a phenomenon of transcendental (‘objective’) aesthetic judgement only as a result of a mode of contemplation that has been sanitised of desire.<sup>31</sup>

For instance: to appreciate the nude in a manner sensitive to its aesthetic value one must learn to suspend any erotic desire that may be provoked by the sight of the model’s naked figure. For, if the body becomes the object of sexual desire, then it is not possible to dwell exclusively on, and thereby completely appreciate, the aesthetic significance of the nude, because one has not engaged the conditions of disinterested perception that enable the artistic value – the *beauty* – of the naked human body to emerge and be comprehended as an end in itself (and *not* as a means to satisfy sexual appetite, or as a vehicle to express erotic passions, or whatever). When we disinterestedly consider the naked body as an abstract design that stimulates a kind of pleasure completely unlike the visceral thrill of erotic desire, only then can we begin to contemplate it, in the disinterested mode relevant to Kant’s theory, as an aesthetic form: the nude.<sup>32</sup> And every authentic judgement of aesthetic value is only made on the basis of such emotionally detached contemplation, unsullied by means–ends motivation.

Disinterestedness, following the psychological revision of the Kantian standard in the modern era,<sup>33</sup> has become generally understood in the philosophy of art as a specific modality of perception that, in ‘disengaging’ our normal responses, imaginatively removing practical concerns and emotional reactions and, crucially, suppressing any *moral* responses,<sup>34</sup> becomes sensitised to what makes an object qualify as art. This is the assumption that the distinctively aesthetic value of the art object only discloses itself to a particular kind of perception that is not our ‘normal’ attitude to ordinary objects. Key

to this sensitive perception is the requirement that the subject of the aesthetic experience (i.e. the person experiencing it) be in a special kind of *state*, a contemplative or abstract state that, responsive to the harmonious expression of pure forms, enables the category of beauty to emerge and be recognised as transcendental, that is, shared by everyone with the subjective capacity for aesthetic judgement.

Because it apparently supplies an objective criterion for artistic value, enabling critics to distinguish aesthetic value from mere opinion, Kantian disinterestedness has had an overwhelming influence on the subsequent philosophy (and criticism) of art. It has been centrally upheld, reinforced and repeatedly recommended by post-Kantian institutional aesthetics, and it continues to exert a palpable magnetism on philosophers of art; present as a tacit commitment, it also informs the writing of many contemporary art critics. Yet it is precisely this concept that much important contemporary artistic practice actively tries to sabotage by engaging with the ‘extra-aesthetic’ contexts of the very emotional, sexual and especially *moral* life-worlds prescriptively disengaged by the dogma of disinterestedness.

Consider, for instance, Paul McCarthy’s *Bossy Burger* (1991), the first in a repertoire of combination performance and video installations that, taken together, constitute a grievous assault on the sensibility of taste institutionalised by post-Kantian aesthetics. A synthetic environment, made up of plywood studio sets from an axed television sitcom is the setting of *Bossy Burger*. In the claustrophobic confines of this studio set, the artist, dressed in a chef’s overalls, yellow rubber gloves, an apron and hat, and wearing a mask of Alfred E. Neuman (from *Mad* magazine), shambles, evacuating plastic ketchup and industrial mayonnaise containers of their contents. Grumbling and moaning, he squeezes and splatters, smearing every surface, filling every available vessel with the viscid ooze. Narcissistically absorbed in his purposeless business, and finally, completely covered in the mess, he kneels on the table and begins to apply coats of the coagulating ketchup to a tatty armchair.

Witnessing McCarthy’s acts of unscripted regression is extremely distressing. ‘Mayonnaise goes on a chopstick and gets shoved into the ketchup’ (as one observer reported); “‘Fuck it up the butt,” [McCarthy] yells and puts the chopstick up his ass, then back into the bottle.’<sup>35</sup> Such excessive behaviour without purpose is paradigmatically transgressive in the Batailleian sense because it constitutes a pure expression of primordial irrationality that exceeds sense, meaning and, of course, *every traditional measure of aesthetic value*. ‘The removal and separateness, the passive attention we associate with contemplation have little place here.’<sup>36</sup>

Yet this should not be taken to mean that transgressive work (such as McCarthy’s) does not count as art. Rather such transgressive ART renders orthodox aesthetics redundant because the leitmotif of aesthetic theory, the

concept of disinterested contemplation – and especially its purported universal application – is exposed as deficient in application to it: *but it is still art*.

In post-Kantian aesthetic theory, beauty, as we have seen, is centrally positioned as a transcendental category: ‘Without beauty, no theory of aesthetics can have’, Ruth Lorand observes, ‘a reasonable [meaning “objective”] explanatory power.’<sup>37</sup> What about its opposite? A judgement of aesthetic value takes place when, according to the disinterested mode of perception, a certain object is recognised to possess the necessary formal aesthetic criteria to result in pleasure, and the rational, if irresistible, judgement of beauty. What happens, on the other hand, when an *ugly* object causes *displeasure*? Does the category of ugliness have equal rights in an aesthetic evaluation? For orthodox post-Kantian aesthetics, the answer is emphatically NO: ‘If beauty is characterised as a quality that is perceived by disinterestedness, then the opposite [ugliness] produced by negating this characteristic would be an instrumental, non-aesthetic value which is [detrimentally] informed by interest.’<sup>38</sup>

Emotions of displeasure – disgust, repulsion, nausea – solicited by the sheer ugliness of McCarthy’s aesthetic refuse to be acclimatised to the disinterested mind-set: we cannot become emotionally detached, or indifferent to the existence of the object, for it is impossible to disengage emotional responses completely and coolly detach ourselves from physical sensations that are involuntarily produced by the performance. In being affected viscerally by scenes of primal-infantile regression, it is impossible to suspend our normal attitude and engage the disinterested perspective. The possibility of ignoring our immediate adverse emotional reactions in order to contemplate the work’s purely formal characteristics is cruelly retracted by the ugliness of the scene.

Example: the abject amorphousness of the materials employed by McCarthy cannot be translated to significant form because they (and how they are being used) refuse to settle into typical aesthetic categories (unlike static, dried paint, glazed on a surface). Although constantly aware that they possess the status of simulacra – they are not the real thing – using these products to act out psychodramas in the way McCarthy does means that they become overdetermined – polymorphous with perverse possibilities.<sup>39</sup>

However, I would argue that the traumatic associations McCarthy’s products assume depend *not* on what they come to symbolise (for instance, blood, body-fluids, excreta etc.). Ketchup and mayonnaise (and the other ‘fluxes’ he uses, hand-cream, milk etc.) are not transubstantiated by McCarthy into their referents; they are not, in fact, meant – despite what critics may suggest – to represent blood or other body-fluids. Rather they remain intractably what they are. In this way, the ketchup and mayonnaise, as displacements, phobic substitutes for personal neuroses, devoid of any general significance, utterly contingent, arbitrary and horrifically inconsistent, become *more* disturbing, more abject and more traumatic – precisely *as* ketchup *and* mayonnaise –

than any intentional deployment that aimed at direct reference to blood or semen.<sup>40</sup>

First shown in LA, the work was presented as an installation: the stage sets and their contents remained as McCarthy had left them post-performance (surfaces covered in stale sauces and decomposing meat). Crumpled like shed skins, the costume and mask lay discarded in a corner. A video loop of the performance played continuously on two television screens installed in the scaffolding outside the sets. 'Reeking of violence, the scene conjured the aftermath of a barbaric assault'; but the only assault here is the threat to our ability to assimilate the obscene field of McCarthy's art into aesthetic categories – zero tolerance for any orthodox aesthetic value.<sup>41</sup> The aftermath of the performance remained for the duration of the exhibition. What began as mildly noxious became so unbearable that it was, apparently, impossible to enter the shuttered studio rooms. 'Every time you went back you were agreeing to be more nauseated.'<sup>42</sup> To repeat: decomposition and the physical reaction it incites – disgust – are, in principle, intransigent to the aesthetic attitude of disinterestedness.

Other authors have admittedly taken into account the specific challenge to disinterestedness posed by contemporary art. In a recent study that confronts traditional aesthetic values with contemporary artistic tendencies, Matthew Kieran grants that there is 'something fundamentally wrong with Kant's conception of aesthetic value'.<sup>43</sup> He quotes from the sections of the *Third Critique* where Kant argues that it is impossible to render beautiful 'that which excites *disgust*', for the disgustingly repulsive, in provoking an immediate emotional response, cannot be assimilated to disinterested contemplation. In the Kantian aesthetic tradition, that which causes a visceral reaction is necessarily in conflict with a form of aesthetic appreciation that depends on the attitude of critical (or emotional) distance.<sup>44</sup>

Kieran refers in this context to the 'abject art' of US artist Cindy Sherman. He cites a series of photographic images produced in late 1980 dedicated to the theme of repulsion. The so-called 'disgust series', which memorably features post-mortem (de)compositions with human remains incompletely buried among other debris in the displaced earth of a shallow grave, 'seem driven by a practical artistic attempt to investigate Kant's claim that disgust is beyond the pale of an aesthetic response'.<sup>45</sup> As argued, all transgressive art, abject or not, is driven by a similar intent to menace the emotionally distanced perspective associated with the aesthetic attitude, by deliberately provoking emotional responses or visceral reactions that refuse to be assimilated to the disinterested mode of perception. However, Kieran (with reference here to a series of violently misshapen photographs of British artist Jenny Saville squashed up against plate glass) argues that, despite the challenges of transgressive art, it may be possible *nevertheless* to appreciate the repulsive aesthetically. In the case of

Saville's self-portraits, for instance, Kieran stubbornly insists that it is the very obscenity of the image that paradoxically 'grabs our aesthetic interest'.<sup>46</sup> And thus the transgressive artistic impulse, however 'disgusting, grotesque, ugly and incoherent' it may *prima facie* appear, can be processed and domesticated for aesthetic contemplation.<sup>47</sup>

In a similar vein, Cynthia Freeland discusses the work of controversial US artist Andreas Serrano.<sup>48</sup> Again, acknowledging the difficulties that transgressive art present to traditional paradigms of aesthetic judgement, she considers various approaches to his work. She concedes that recent art practice seems utterly remote from eighteenth-century aesthetic ideals. 'Art includes', she recognises, 'not just works of formal beauty to be enjoyed by people with "taste", or works with beauty and uplifting moral messages, but also works that are ugly and disturbing, with a shatteringly negative moral content.'<sup>49</sup> When confronted with the transgressive photographic work of Serrano, for instance, it is simply not possible to assume a distanced attitude and remain indifferent to its disturbing content.

A significant challenge to the historical legacy of disinterestedness has come from feminist philosophy. Associating the disinterested attitude with an aspiration that is specifically masculine in character,<sup>50</sup> for instance, Peggy Zeglin Brand, in 'Disinterestedness and Political Art', takes issue with the alleged objectivity, universality and 'neutrality' involved in the notion of disinterestedness.<sup>51</sup> Detecting in these concepts the outlines of a phallogocentric grand narrative, she argues that certain kinds of postmodernist art demand, on the contrary, an *interested* approach. This is particularly the case, she says, with interventional feminist art.

In exploring her hypothesis, she uses the example of the controversial French performance artist known as Orlan. Since 1990, Orlan has voluntarily undergone facial transformation with the help of intensive surgical reconstruction.<sup>52</sup> She arranged to have the series of operations filmed while under local anaesthetic and transmitted live via satellite to various venues in Europe and North America. The result is an on-going performance entitled 'The Reincarnation of St Orlan' in which she attempts to demonstrate, in the most severe and uncompromising manner, the absurd futility of striving to achieve the elusive ideal of beauty established by (the gendered discourse of) classical aesthetics.

Following a physiognomy grafted of features appropriated from art historical paradigms of beauty: 'the chin of Botticelli's Venus, the Fontainebleau school's Diana, the lips of Gustave Moreau's Europa, the nose of Gerome's Psyche, the brow of Leonardo's Mona Lisa',<sup>53</sup> Orlan's extended performance, Brand concludes, 'is meant to discourage women from reconstructive surgery'.<sup>54</sup> Her material, the site of her expression, the surface on which her transformative project unfolds, is her own suffering body; but her face, far from achieving any



paradigmatic beauty, has been distorted into a ghastly parody – a Frankenstein’s monster – of classical beauty. Thus the aesthetic paradox is cruelly, monstrously, demonstrated: Orlan’s attempt to achieve ideal beauty in reality results in ugliness; even if we are *theoretically* aware that all efforts to achieve beauty by physical intervention based on the notion of perfect aesthetic form are vain (in both senses), to see the ocular proof of this is profoundly shocking. ‘If the parts of seven different ideal women are needed to fulfill [*sic*] Adam’s desire for an Eve made in his image,’ Barbara Rose observes, ‘Orlan consciously chooses to undergo the necessary mutilation to reveal that the objective is unattainable and the process horrifying.’<sup>55</sup>

To the extent that viewers may recognise Orlan’s effort to make a point about masculine-determined stereotypical notions of feminine beauty and to the extent that they may admire the extreme lengths she is prepared to go for her beliefs (like McCarthy, her work has been contextualised in relation to Viennese Actionism<sup>56</sup>), and to the extent that those critics may identify with the pressure she feels placed under to conform to a hegemonic concept of beauty largely conditioned by male desire, such responses to the work cannot, according to Brand, be disinterested. Rather, the work of Orlan is an instance of art that, on the contrary, provokes an *interested* response.<sup>57</sup>

However, drawing on Wittgensteinian aspect-seeing, Brand goes on to develop the counter-argument that, despite this conclusion, it *is* possible to appreciate the extreme acts of transgressive art disinterestedly.<sup>58</sup> Employing the ambiguous duck–rabbit sketch from the *Philosophical Investigations* (two distinct figures in one design that, depending on the aspect attended to, can be seen as either one figure or the other: i.e. now it is a duck, now a rabbit),<sup>59</sup> she argues that it is possible to toggle between the different modalities of aesthetic perception. Like a stereoscopic card, the work can appear now one way, now another: now individual woman suffering mid-term pain and discomfort (as well as transformed facial features), now interesting composition and colour, fascinating glistening crimsons and purplish blooms, pink smudges, clinical green-grey textures. Brand’s conclusion is ‘that although the adoption of a stance of traditional disinterestedness is a masculinist approach to the experiencing of a work of art, it is still a possible and appropriate, useful mode of experiencing art, including feminist art’.<sup>60</sup>

Brand, like many defenders of the aesthetic attitude, as we can see here, has opted for a *prescriptive* (as opposed to *descriptive*) mode of expression to argue for the merits of disinterestedness in the critical appreciation of art. There is a subtle but not imperceptible shift in her analysis from the description of a situation in contemporary art practice to the prescription of how we *ought* to experience such a situation. Such, I would argue, is the magnetism of the concept of disinterested contemplation that even where it is disabled by contemporary transgressive art-acts, and even in contexts where it is explicitly

acknowledged to be an outmoded theoretical construct, it has been tacitly committed to all along until finally reparsed as the ideal aesthetic attitude.

It is by emphasising a paradoxical double-aspect modality in 'aesthetic' perception that Kieran and Brand can claim that the categories of traditional aesthetics can and should be preserved for the appreciation of contemporary, and especially, transgressive art. This moral argument seems to suggest that what *prima facie* incites nausea should ultimately, when attention falls on an alternative aspect of the same phenomenon, be revealed as beautiful. But Will Self's phrase from a critique of art criticism's use of philosophical tropes such as this seems apt here: 'Like clever children playing with one of those stereoscopic postcards [the critics] flick it this way and that, to show the Emperor alternately naked and adorned.'<sup>61</sup> Thus, by flicking our attention this way and that, we can learn to love the obscene. By forcing ourselves to become emotionally detached according to the disinterested mode, what is obscene or unacceptable can be adapted to aesthetic form and thus appreciated as ultimately beautiful.

But is it not to completely miss the point to treat transgressive art in this way? Is it not misdirected in some crucial sense to argue that Orlan's work *should* be contemplated disinterestedly, from an emotionally detached perspective? Is her performance not supposed to affect us emotionally, viscerally, physically? What she is doing is intended to have a direct and unpleasant effect on us. If it doesn't shock, it ceases to have its desired function. Because it is *meant to shock*, it is intended to make us involuntarily exclaim: STOP! *This is wrong*. Yet it is precisely this kind of ethical reaction to art practice that the revisers of disinterestedness attempt to neutralise, because what Orlan is doing is very difficult to defend on a moral level, but, they believe, through exhuming cadaverous aesthetic principles, it can be justified as art. And yet the intensification of this very conflict, I would suggest, constitutes the entire meaning of Orlan's enterprise.

By demonstrating that she is prepared to go to obscene, unacceptable lengths for her convictions, Orlan forces witnesses of her project to accept the morally questionable nature of her volitions (which one critic has condemned as a submission to 'medical barbarism' motivated by 'self-hatred')<sup>62</sup> as artistically meaningful – that is, as an ethically necessary form of cultural transgression. Otherwise the political objective of the work – namely, to disclose the irrationality of the concept of perfect formal female beauty (as determined, again, by Western philosophical aesthetics according to the mode of disinterested perception) by metamorphosing herself into what Parveen Adams has called an 'art-historical morph'<sup>63</sup> – would not emerge so clearly and with such admirable conviction.

## The Ethics of Transgressive Art

Against an overwhelming consensus to the contrary, this book will propose that ethical analysis is an effective and critically revealing method of engaging with contemporary transgressive art. I am specifically interested in artists that, like Orlan, challenge the aesthetic attitude of disinterestedness through engaging moral sensibility. Because ethical judgement is institutionally considered to be anathema to aesthetic appreciation, such art can be identified as paradigmatically transgressive precisely because the reaction it provokes is a *moral* reaction.

But what do I mean by moral reaction? The signature of morally transgressive practice is that it proposes engagement with the work on an ethical – as opposed to aesthetic – level. What I have in mind here is art, similar to the work of Orlan, that initially produces a kind of moral shock, a shock experienced, moreover, as a visceral reaction that refuses to be processed according to the disinterested modality. For those willing to accept the challenge of this kind of art – for those who engage with it, in other words – the effect is *moral* and not aesthetic (or at least not exclusively aesthetic).

Typically, reaction to transgressive art assumes the form, THIS IS WRONG: the artist was wrong to have done this. Such work may, however, motivate the subsequent, (re)considered and highly complex, indeed, tortuous response: this is difficult, may appear indeed to be wrong, or immoral, but the artist was ultimately right to engage this difficult and contentious subject-matter – because its overall ethos demands approval and establishes that the transgression the work entails is ethically justifiable. This phenomenon of reflective moral response I shall later identify as the ethical *aftershock* of the work.

My approach not only takes issue therefore with a very powerful art-critical consensus, but also questions Julius's assertion that the 'transgressive aesthetic is not an aesthetic of immorality.'<sup>64</sup> It would be to misconstrue my argument, however, if it were taken to suggest that transgressive art *is* immoral; rather, my position would be parsed more accurately if it were taken to claim that certain kinds of transgressive art practice seem deliberately designed to *engage moral sensibility* by provoking a negative ethical response. But how is ethics being understood here?

Philosophical ethical discourse is the zone of the controversial and the perpetually disputable. Because ethical principles are not objective – moral values do not possess the status of mind-independent facts that can be established with definitive empirical or rational precision<sup>65</sup> – as Martha C. Nussbaum argues, ethical theory 'cannot be a form of scientific knowledge that orders "matters of the practical" into an elegant antecedent system'.<sup>66</sup> Contentious as it may be to claim, it is almost as if the mark of a genuine moral problem is precisely