

The challenging of institutions within the art world



TERM 1 WEEK 5 The challenging of institutions within the art world “

Artworks are designed to challenge institutions and test the limits of tolerance,” (John A Walker) as they challenge the historical context of traditional institutions, such as conventions, government and religious views, by viewing works.

Through the post-modern frame (examining how artists and artworks challenge traditional bounds and rules, and conventions in art including concepts of originality and authenticity), artists in contemporary societies have started to use non-conventional, appropriated techniques to create new meaning within their works- shocking audiences and challenging institutional tolerance, ‘ limits of tolerance’ (John A Walker) often being assessed through audiences reaction, censorship and the banning of exhibitions.

The Sensation Exhibition is a collection by Charles Saatchi opened in 1997 to attempt to define a generation of artists, shocking the world with their controversial themes and medias. Three works within this exhibition that challenge the institution and tested the boundaries of their tolerance were The Holy Virgin Mary (1996) by Chris Ofili which explores the hypocrisy of Catholicism, The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Something Living (1991) by Damien Hirst which deals with the cycle of life and death and My Bed (1999) by Tracey Emin which explores the most brutal times in Emin’s life.

Each of these works tests the boundaries of tolerance for institutional galleries, religion, society and morality, challenging and confronting the way they are viewed within each institution. The Sensation Exhibition, lead to an

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up roar by members of society, including aspects of the art world Chris Ofili's, *The Holy Virgin Mary* was a leading cause of controversy in the Sensation Exhibition due to the potent mixture of themes such as purity, pornography and excrement.

On two lumps of dried, varnished elephant dung, sits Ofili's work of an African American Madonna, covered in Renaissance styled drapery. *The Holy Virgin Mary* appropriates and recontextulizes the traditional Virgin Mary, not only by this but, by juxtaposing the pure, innocence of cherubs and substituting not only their physicality on the canvas but also their meaning with photographs of female genitalia. Ofili's work plays with the idea that women should bear full chastity but also embarrass her sexuality within, highlighting the hypocrisy of Catholicism.

The Holy Virgin Mary challenges the Catholic Church as an institution through the recontextulization of the Virgin Mary- a pure and sacred symbol in Catholicism. How individual views each work within each gallery institution is different. " You don't have the right to a government subsidy for desecrating someone's religion. " (Rudolph Giuliani- Mayor of New York) *The Holy Virgin Mary* provoked the anger of Giuliani, not only outraged because of the pornographic elements of the artwork but also its painting surface and support on elephant dung.

For Guliani, this work was interpreted as an insulting and blasphemous attack on the holy status of the Virgin Mary. While Giuliani sees the work as disrespect to religion, Ofili himself sees the piece as a work of beauty, the elephant dung highlighting the natural phenomenon of life, another entity of

purity within itself. Through Ofili's work, religion has become a reoccurring subject of art, not because of any religious beliefs held by the artist himself, but to show the result of change in society, including religions place therein.

Society has been conditioned by institutions to behave in a contemplative, reflective manner when viewing museum works. Every individual views a work differently, thus challenging the limits of not only an individual's tolerance but also an institution as a whole through the general public's expression and reflection on a work. Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility in the Mind of Something Living* explores the confronting idea of death in a hypocritical light.

Hirst's use of the physical form of a dead shark, which is known as a symbol of death and fear is very confronting. The public viewing this work may question these stereotypical ideas associated with this animal whilst being able to stare it directly in the face, in all its silence and serenity. The use of formaldehyde to preserve the external remains of the dead shark makes the audience think about the internal happenings of not only the shark but also themselves, as an individual and what happens in your mind when you are physically dead. Damien Hirst's quest to be edgy is as boring as it is callous. It does not matter whether Hirst killed the animals himself or sat by while thousands of them were massacred for his own unjustifiable amusement. Sharks are a part of nature and should be allowed to live in the wild instead of destroyed for something predictable and unimaginative. " (Same Glover, PETA) The reaction of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) towards Hirst's was that he was barbaric and cruel, not recognising Hirst's works as art.

Presented in a gallery space, with the subject matter and materials used, suspended within a glass tank is an unconventional art form in itself- also contributing to the tolerance and challenging of the gallery institution and the public as an institution. This reaction, “ In keeping with the piece’s title, the shark is simultaneously life and death incarnate in a way you don’t quite grasp until you see it, suspended and silent, in its tank. It gives the innately demonic urge to live a demonic, deathlike form. (New York Times 2007) This extract emphasises the effect this piece has on the audience when seen up close and personal in the actual gallery space, thus testing the limits of audience and gallery tolerance and challenging the space it exhibits in. Art within an institution is used to influence the public’s attitude and beliefs or, in some cases, relate to a smaller group who have gone through the similar experiences in life. “ It was as if it was no longer the task to produce masterpieces, but to use the making and showing of art in the service of some more socially urgent endeavour”. Arthur Danto) Tracey Emin’s, My Bed does exactly this. My Bed explores an individual’s issue of identity, sexuality and morality in a brutally honest way through the contemplation of suicide. Emin’s work confronts an audience by letting you into her world to explore the toughest yet greatest times in her life. This subject is much more fragile than Hirst’s and Ofili’s work as it makes the connection between a personal hardship in Emin’s life rather than the fear of death felt in Hirst’s work or the traditional vs. modern exploration created by Ofili.

By putting something, so personal such as a bed on display in a gallery setting- the traditional design of the institution as a place for a ‘ masterpiece’ has been challenged through the raw and honestly

confrontation of Emin's work. "Emin brings life in things taken from the real world — into the art gallery and leaves it there, more or less unchanged" (The Telegraph) This statement supports Emin's connection to individuals who go through depression and contemplation of suicide through the raw, untouched entities of her bedroom, exaggerating the self-absorption and self-pity felt in an isolated room full of negative, undermining thoughts. Through placing such an intimate entity in a gallery space and making it her own room, Emin challenges the gallery as an institution by making it a more personalized experience for not only the people who have gone through this hardship, but everyone by placing something so uncanny in a public gallery, blurring the line between private and public externalisation. "Artworks are designed to challenge institutions and test the limits of tolerance," by attempting to define a generation of artists and their diverse and controversial artistic visions.

Through different medias, attributing to their post modernistic conventions, The Holy Virgin Mary by Chris Ofili, The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Something Living by Damien Hirst and My Bed by Tracey Emin all challenge and test the boundaries of tolerance for institutional galleries, religion, society and mortality. Each work explores the recontextulization of gallery spaces through the historical context by redefining an institution as a place that challenges history rather than upholds the traditional design of conventional, 'classical' art.

Institutions such as PETA, religion, governments and the public, have all been challenged by artworks, thus redefining institutions and being designed to test their limitations. Bibliography: 27/2/13, retrieved from the world wide <https://assignbuster.com/the-challenging-of-institutions-within-the-art-world/>

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