

Art with an Asterisk

The National Gallery of Art in Washington decided to indefinitely postpone a Chuck Close exhibition after the artist was accused of making lewd comments to and asking invasive questions about potential portrait models. While Close called the allegations “lies,” this news resurfaced the question of “whether the work of [...] artists accused of questionable conduct needs to be revisited or recontextualized.”¹ Outside of the art galleries, similar questions have been asked about a range of prominent members of the entertainment industry—from Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey to Louis C. K. and Bill Cosby—whose careers were extinguished by sexual harassment and assault accusations, even before a courtroom determined guilt.

What role do those who curate the art play in determining an answer to this question? Amidst the accusations levied against Close, the National Gallery decided to postpone its exhibit indefinitely, but the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts opted to leave its exhibition featuring the artist open, altering it to become a space of dialogue.² Netflix went ahead with the final season of *House of Cards* without its main actor Kevin Spacey, but viewers can watch the previous 5 seasons of his portrayal of Frank Underwood without any asterisk affixed to the series or warning that the star might have been sexually predatory. These examples highlight the variety of ways organizations that house the art of disgraced artists have reckoned with this dilemma.

Some are more willing than others to separate the art from the artist, at least in certain cases. Jock Reynolds, the director of the Yale University Art Gallery, told *The New York Times*: “Pablo Picasso was one of the worst offenders of the 20th century in terms of his history with women. Are we going to take his work out of the galleries? At some point you have to ask yourself, is the art going to stand alone as something that needs to be seen?”³

Some argue that we should not endeavor to separate the art from the artist and instead explore what, if any, connection there is between Chuck Close’s alleged harassment of potential portrait models and the genre-defining portraiture he would create as a way of better understanding his art. As Amanda Hess notes, “If a piece of art is truly spoiled by an understanding of the conditions under which it is made, then perhaps the artist was not quite as exceptional as we had thought.” Perhaps seeing the artist’s asterisks is the way to truly appreciate the artist’s art.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If it is possible to celebrate the art without excusing the transgressions of the artist, what form should that celebration take? If it is not, what becomes of the art?
2. Suppose the work is historically transformative and has produced an immeasurable amount of good for humanity—akin to a revolutionary advancement in technology or medicine. Does celebration of the art excuse the (possibly unrelated) transgression(s) of the artist?⁴
3. What does it mean to display art “with an asterisk?” How much consideration should curators give to the psychological safety of art consumers?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/28/arts/design/chuck-close-exhibit-harassment-accusations.html>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/feb/15/chuck-close-art-sexual-harassment-pafa>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/sexual-harassment-art-hollywood.html>

⁴ <https://www.prindlepost.org/2018/11/is-it-okay-to-wear-a-house-of-cards-t-shirt/>

