

Killer Art

Since the arrival of postmodern art, and in particular performance art, there have been legitimate concerns raised about the impropriety of some artworks. Whereas in the past artworks have generally only been considered capable of being instrumentally immoral, some new art works seem to be in themselves morally dubious.

Cases of such artworks abound. In 1974, grandmother of performance art, Marina Abramovich, created a piece called 'Rhythm 0' which invited audience members to do anything they liked to her with a variety of items. The items ranged from feathers, to knives, to a loaded gun. She is reported to have said "I was ready to die."¹ In the event, she was groped, stripped of her clothes, cut with razor blades, and had a loaded gun aimed at her head.² Other examples include Marco Evaristti's 'Helena & El Pescador'. This work displayed 10 food blenders each containing a live goldfish. The visitors were given the option of blitzing the fish and some did.³ Finally, famous Chinese artist, Ai Wei Wei, photographed himself smashing a 2000-year-old, Han dynasty urn.⁴ Such an act of destruction was considered unethical by many.

To be sure, each of these performance pieces varies immensely in their potential ethical transgressions. Assuming any blame is warranted at all, it's not clear the artists themselves are blameworthy—in the first two cases, they merely set the conditions for others to do harm. Though none of the aforementioned works were found to be illegal, they may still be immoral.

These works all have commendable ethical intentions – they seek to improve the audience's moral sensibilities in an educational and challenging way. Abramovich's piece is a warning of people's potential to violence when they are absolved of responsibility; Evaristti's piece forces the audience to confront humanity's immense power over animals, and Wei's piece encourages the audience to preserve art and heritage. As a result, it could be argued that a piece of art successful in conveying its message might generate more overall good than is lost in producing the piece. Additionally, many argue that the principle of artistic freedom is important. For example, when defending Evaristti, his lawyer argued that, "an artist has the right to create works which defy our concept of what is right and what is wrong."⁵ Limiting art might do more harm than good.

However, as regards the good intentions of the artists, it's not always clear that an artist's intended message is the one actually received. In general, when people engage in acts of harm, it's plausible that people become desensitized to harm and are more likely to commit further harm. It's also not clear why it's necessary for the works to be immoral themselves in order to achieve an effective message: many people believe conventional art is highly successful in achieving moral education.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should artists ever create unethical, or even illegal, artworks?
2. Should unethical art, such as is mentioned in the case, be censored? Should art ever be censored? If so, by whom?
3. Suppose art should sometimes be permitted to blur ethical boundaries. In virtue of what should it be allowed to do this? Is all art like this or only some art?
4. If a piece of performance art is unethical, who is blameworthy? Consider each of the examples given in the case.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/12/marina-abramovich-ready-to-die-serpentine-gallery-512-hours>

² <https://www.elitereaders.com/performance-artist-marina-abramovich-social-experiment/>

³ <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2013/08/28/marco-evaristti-and-his-goldfish-are-still-making-waves/>

⁴ <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/art-crime/0/steps/11886>

⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3040891.stm>

