

Sentient Symbols: The Implications of Animal Cruelty Debates in Contemporary Australian Art

Sarah K. Balstrup

Introduction

What can be represented in art? This is both a question about the limits of the aesthetic form, and a question of the politics of representation. This article addresses this question in relation to the use of animal bodies in contemporary art, focusing mainly on Australian examples particularly where they seem to challenge the limits of representation because of controversies generated. That is, whether the artist has used live animals, animal corpses, or meat, the artworks considered here have been met with a mixture of commendation and moral outrage. In the main, public comment has been phrased in terms of an ethical concern for animal welfare.¹ While Australia does have a range of laws in place to protect animals from cruel treatment, these laws have been developed to be context and industry specific.² Given that animal bodies have only been used in contemporary art in the last twenty years or so, the parameters for acceptable practice are still being determined. Unlike other industries that might seek to reduce public perceptions of cruelty in regard to their treatment of animals,³ contemporary artists are unique in their attempts to create the vivid *perception* of cruelty, whilst simultaneously professing to support animal rights, or at the very least abide by current animal protection laws. It is this conflation of real and illusory cruelty that is at the heart of the issue when considering the ethical justification of the use of animals in art. While perceived cruelty generates public comment against the artwork, artists defend themselves by claiming that the cruelty is not, in fact, real but 'real' in

Sarah K. Balstrup is an Honours student in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney.

¹ As contemporary arts discourse is not something that generally attracts the attention of the wider public, this article uses the term 'public' to represent a wide range of people who have only a vague interest in or knowledge of the arts and who would generally not enter into debates about the artistic value of contemporary pieces. Their comments are recorded in newspaper articles, popular media, online forums, and petition websites.

² Peter Sankoff and Steven White, *Animal Law in Australasia: A New Dialogue* (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2009), p. 23.

³ For instance, the farming or pet industries.

that the artist seeks an emotive reaction in response to the animal and the work in question.

The ethical tensions created by such illusions are instrumental in the creation of meaning in these artworks; yet, as artists purposefully exploit social taboos in order to incite a strong audience reaction, protests raised against such artworks should not be viewed simply in terms of an encroachment on artistic freedom. At one level, the ideals of artists and activists are similar, in that they presumably seek to expose injustices and systems of oppression in order to liberate various social groups. In regard to the use of animal bodies in art, however, these groups could not be more opposed. Adopting a methodological approach based upon Erving Goffman's frame analysis, this article explores the ways in which different contextual frames come into play in ethical arguments about animals and aesthetics.⁴ As one adopts a particular contextual frame when viewing an artwork, one has a very different ethical response to when a similar scene in the art occurs in the everyday world. Despite this 'framed' change, animal rights rhetoric attempts to be all encompassing and argues for animal liberation in very similar terms to other socially marginalised groups.⁵ It will become evident in the course of this article that as soon as the contextual frame has shifted to 'animal rights,' aesthetic considerations become irrelevant.⁶ Similarly, when viewed in light of the history of contemporary art,

⁴ Frame analysis involves the understanding that people do not apply the same set of values to all situations and that, at an experiential level, individuals engage with established social frameworks in order to generate meaning. Without realizing it, an individual can shift from frame to frame as their context shifts, so that seemingly contradictory values can be present in the one person as each value makes sense within the framework that it is applied. See Erving Goffman, 'Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience,' in *The Goffman Reader*, eds Charles Lemert and Ann Branaman (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), pp. 149-167.

⁵ Jodey Castricano, 'Introduction,' in *Animal Subjects: An Ethical Reader in a Posthuman World*, ed. Jodey Castricano (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), pp. 1-5.

⁶ For the purposes of this article, the 'animal rights' position refers to those individuals who speak out in public forums against what they consider to be the cruel treatment of animals, such as those in P.E.T.A. As Cass R. Sunstein points out, 'animal rights' and 'animal welfare' positions are distinct from each other; the objections raised in contemporary art debates, however, are of a general nature and cannot be aligned with one ideological perspective on human-animal relations. See Cass R. Sunstein, 'Introduction: What are Animal Rights?,' in *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions*, eds Cass R. Sunstein and Martha C. Nussbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 4-6.

the use of animal bodies appears to be part of a logical progression for certain streams of the aesthetic tradition.

In the history of art animals have performed a symbolic role, yet up until recently the depiction of animals has not involved the use of actual animal bodies as part of the depiction itself. As such, contemporary artists draw upon the rich history of animal symbolism that is a part of the tradition of fine art. Yet, by using real animal bodies, aesthetic discourse is combined with much broader debates where animals play a very different socially symbolic role. In contemporary Australian society, it appears that the values of the animal rights movement have become normative, and that while people may use different contextual frameworks to deal with their varied encounters with animals, there is nonetheless a prevailing attitude that animals deserve fair and respectful treatment.⁷ The widespread tendency to personify animals in fictive form and in their role as pets engenders a markedly personal type of emotional relationship between humans and certain animals. The animals used by artists in this study include common household pets like goldfish, cats, dogs, and budgies, and the symbolic power of these animals is particularly potent. Equally familiar animals such as chickens, horses, and cattle have also been used, and this collection of creatures can be united by their domesticated roles and their dependence on human beings to provide care and ensure their wellbeing. At first glance, many of the artworks considered in this study appear to make unnecessary use of animals, and this use may seem all the more cruel because it is arbitrary. Upon closer inspection, however, there are very few cases where the artist has caused actual pain or distress to a living creature. The complex implications of these challenging works requires sensitive treatment, as after a legal assessment, perpetration of 'animal cruelty' may be more accurately defined as the disrespectful use of the animal body which seems to entail its own sense of cruelty to the 'memory' of the animal. The expression of concern, however, regarding convincing illusions of cruelty is not without justification. The urge to shock the viewer and play with the reality line has meant that artists continually strive to generate experiences that are as close to real as possible. In a few of the cases discussed here, artists have gone one step too far and have tortured and killed animals for the sake of art. It is then the purpose of this study to determine whether the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable artistic practice should be between that which is

⁷ 'Animal Welfare,' *Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, at http://www.dfat.gov.au/facts/animal_welfare.html. Accessed 27/04/2011.

technically cruel and that which is acceptable by law, or if the ethical question of respect should play a part in the world of aesthetics.

The Biennale of Sydney 2008: Mike Parr's Chicken and the Cruel Act

In 2008, police were sent to Cockatoo Island to investigate an alleged instance of animal cruelty. According to senior constable Michelle Heyward, initial complaints suggested "a male was decapitating chickens on the island."⁸ Although this was not actually the case, Mike Parr's video installation that was a part of the Biennale of Sydney did depict a live chicken being decapitated. While Parr's installation featured many disturbing images of self-mutilation including cutting and sewing his own flesh, the image of the chicken provoked such a strong reaction in some spectators that they felt compelled to call the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA).

The theme of the 2008 Biennale of Sydney was 'Revolutions: Forms that Turn.' Carolyn Chistov-Bakargiev, the exhibition's curator, devised this theme to investigate the notion of revolution in contemporary art practice, and the curious etymology of the term that simultaneously suggests sudden change, and the cyclic movement of return. A guidebook for the exhibition elaborated that;

[m]any works in this year's exhibition are participatory, encouraging people to step inside art and discover new ways of looking and thinking about life today...The 2008 Biennale of Sydney exhibition creates a platform where we can appreciate creativity as the expression of cultural changes: of revolutions in thought and society.⁹

As this excerpt demonstrates, the artist is characterised as a figure who can usher in revolutions of the mind, which effectively positions them in an antithetical position to institutionalised values. The image of the artist as social provocateur has persisted since the birth of modern art, and is just as relevant now as then, despite differences in style and approach.¹⁰ It is the artist's job to destabilise social narratives and incite controversy in order to promote change. The contemporary art community treasures controversial artists, and while this

⁸ Richard Jinman and Kylie Davis, 'Police warn Biennale over Chicken Video,' *Sydney Morning Herald* (June 18, 2008), at <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/police-warn-biennale-over-chicken-video/2008/06/17/1213468421696.html>. Accessed 19/04/2011.

⁹ The Biennale of Sydney, 'The 16th Biennale of Sydney Teachers Kit,' *The 2008 Biennale of Sydney* (2008), at http://www.bos2008.com/files/education/bos-2008-teachers_kit.pdf, p. 9. Accessed 19/04/2011.

¹⁰ Matthew Kieran, *Revealing Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 49.

may point to an unsettling corruption of revolutionary ideals through an allegiance with commercial bodies,¹¹ this has led to an interesting shift in artistic practice. I would suggest that it is precisely this alliance between artistic institutions and provocative artists that has prompted the artist to focus less on breaking aesthetic conventions, and more on subverting social taboos, as these can still provoke a strong reaction in an audience.

Drawing on the Expressionist tradition, Mike Parr's art is mostly concerned with the human body, and the techniques of self-mutilation found in the video installation on Cockatoo Island were typical of his *oeuvre*. The installation, known as *MIRROR/ARSE*, was set up in a dilapidated building, where the viewer could wander through a series of rooms in which Parr's film footage was projected. The building stank, and puddles of water were left untended amidst footage of the artist sewing and cutting his own flesh and vomiting blue dye, along with images of chickens being beheaded. According to Parr, the work was "a way of revealing tensions within my family,"¹² and it is clear from the context of the chicken image that the artwork had little to do with animals or their rights. The attacks on the human body perpetrated in Parr's work may disgust and offend, but it is the artist's own body, so it is difficult to argue that someone is being exploited. The chicken, however, is an animal, and there are laws that can be appealed to on that count.¹³

As a result of public outcry, and the call to the RSPCA, Parr's exhibition was assessed, and an 'over eighteen' sign was placed at the entry to the exhibit, warning viewers about explicit content and images of a bird being killed.¹⁴ This reaction suggests a reaction of censorship rather than that of care for the animal. Parr himself was not deemed to be at fault in terms of the chicken's death, as the footage was from the 1970s. As the artist grew up on a chicken farm where this method of killing chickens was a part of everyday life,¹⁵ Parr is

¹¹ Will Bradley, 'Introduction,' in *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*, eds Will Bradley and Charles Esche (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), pp. 9-10.

¹² Parr quoted in Michael Young, 'Decapitations and Protestations – Cut, Stitch and Draw Mike Parr,' *Art Asia Pacific Magazine*, no. 62 (2009), at <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/62/DecapitationsAndProtestationsCutBurnStitchAndDrawMikeParr>. Accessed 15/04/2011.

¹³ Although Australian law protects animals from harm, animals are still considered to be 'property' rather than beings in their own right. Pragmatic decisions may be made where economic issues are the deciding factor. Sankoff and White, *Animal Law in Australasia*, p. 58.

¹⁴ The existing sign had not specified what type of disturbing images the exhibit would contain. See Jinman and Davis, 'Police warn Biennale.'

¹⁵ Young, 'Decapitations and Protestations.'

perhaps desensitised to images of the process of meat production that are generally concealed from the public.¹⁶ While many animal enthusiasts condemned the artwork, Parr was praised for his part in drawing record numbers to the festival.¹⁷ Interestingly, the Biennale also featured a taxidermied horse, yet this work was not deemed disturbing enough to require any kind of censorial warning.¹⁸

Cats, Dogs and Goldfish: Mutilation as Social Comment

In February 2000, the Trapholt Art Museum in Denmark held an exhibition that included an interactive work by artist Marco Evaristti. Ten kitchen blenders were set up containing ten swimming goldfish, and spectators were invited to press the button and liquefy the fish.¹⁹ While many declined the invitation, some obliged and two fish were killed before the police intervened.²⁰ Defending the artist, Museum Director Peter Meyer argued that it was not cruel, as the fish died instantly.²¹ Commenting on the complex ethics of the piece, Mike Parr pointed out that it is almost pointless to contextualise the death of the goldfish within the reality of socially-sanctioned animal slaughter (as some had tried to do) as the real problem is that “artworks are privileged and artists are egotists...the suspicion is that this work is more about art than it is about animals.”²² Parr’s observation is apt, and is certainly

¹⁶ Australians who do not live in rural areas where they might have contact with the processes involved in farm life would rarely witness the process that transforms a live animal into a packaged food product.

¹⁷ The exhibition attracted 37 per cent more visitors than the preceding Biennale. See The Biennale of Sydney, ‘Biennale of Sydney Closes With Record Attendances,’ *The 2008 Biennale of Sydney*, Media Release (September 8, 2008), at http://www.bos2008.com/files/media_releases/biennale_closes_with_record_attendance.pdf. Accessed 21/01/2011.

¹⁸ Maurizio Cattelan, *Novecento*, 1997. Taxidermic horse, leather saddle, rope and pulley, 201.2 x 271.3 x 68.6 cm.

¹⁹ Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. xxx.

²⁰ Brian Bernbaum, ‘The Odd Truth, May 19, 2003’ *CBSNews.com* (February 11, 2003 [May 19, 2003]), at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/05/20/national/main554805.shtml>. Accessed 19/04/2011.

²¹ Bernbaum, ‘The Odd Truth.’

²² Mike Parr in Simon Etherington, ‘Animal Rights and Artistic Freedom,’ *Arts Law Centre – Legal Resources* (June 30, 2003), at

relevant in regard to his own artistic practice where his use of chickens has nothing to do with chickens as such. If Evaristi's installation is more about art than animals, then the artist has transformed a real fish into a symbolic fish, and the act of killing into a conceptual experience. Perhaps provoking thought at an abstract level, the work nonetheless erases the immediate ethical relationship between the person pressing the button, and the actual fish that they kill.

In 2007, the Códice Gallery in Nicaragua exhibited an installation by Guillermo 'Habacuc' Vargas that featured a live stray dog. The dog was tied up and denied food and water so that the viewer had to participate in its death by failing to intervene.²³ While the artist criticised his audience for not helping the dog, it is also claimed that he asked them not to. As was the case with Evaristi's work, the use of the animal body in the art space erases the ethical relationship between human and animal that would ordinarily be present in daily life. Certainly, Vargas has argued that dogs regularly starve to death on the streets and no one does anything about it, yet the claim that his work increases ethical awareness is dubious. In the gallery, the viewer enters a world created by the artist, and one cannot trust the ordinary laws of reality when in this realm of controlled illusion. The fundamental dynamic of the art gallery demands that the viewer be passive, and one must be given explicit cues before one dares to touch or interfere with an artwork. The viewer should also be aware that whatever action s/he takes will be highly meaningful and a part of the overall artwork.²⁴ In the contrived space (i.e. frame) of the gallery, rather

<http://www.artslaw.com.au/articles/entry/animal-rights-and-artistic-freedom/>. Accessed 19/04/2011.

²³ As the majority of information about this incident exists in the form of blogs and petitions, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the dog was actually mistreated. This blog explains some of the varied accounts as well as WSPA's investigation into the issue, which was inconclusive. 'Starving Dog Art,' *Snopes.com* (no publication date; last updated August 10, 2011), at

<http://www.snopes.com/critters/crusader/vargas.asp>. Accessed 20/12/2011. The impact that the work had on an international scale is seen by the protest mounted against the artist through the following blog, which organised the main petition against the artist and had acquired 2,766,735 signatures as of 23/09/2011. 'animalrights', *Guillermo Habacuc Vargas: We Demand Justice! Killing a Dog by Starvation is not Art!* at <http://guillermohabacucvargas.blogspot.com/>. Accessed 23/09/2011.

²⁴ While it has been argued that installation art altered the traditionally passive role of the viewer, it has also been noted that action taken by viewers is not so much 'critically aware' and 'empowered' as predetermined by the design of the artwork. In this sense, interactive art does not involve the full expression of the viewers' 'creative' response,

than being urged towards ethical engagement, the viewer is encouraged not to act but to feel. The viewer experiences the artwork as the pull of contradictory emotions and as the rich experience of affect.

As with Evaristti's goldfish, by confronting the viewer with a real animal, one is torn between two disparate contextual frames. The first assumes that despite the alarming nature of what one perceives, the artist has merely created an uncannily real illusion, while the alternative involves recognising what is seen as if it is real. If the artist has not complied with the unspoken rule that guarantees that the artwork is safe and ethically sound at its base (no matter how disturbing the illusion),²⁵ then the audience cannot definitively apply the contextual frameworks normally utilised in the reception of art. If, whilst appointed as the master of the illusory space, the artist really kills the dog, he has not only committed a heinous act, but he has duped his audience into complicity. At the point where the audience loses faith in the artist, their contextual frame changes, and suddenly the issue is no longer aesthetic; it is a clear matter of animal rights. As noted with regard to Mike Parr's chicken, when the viewer is faced with an anxiety-inducing image of an animal, the first thing people do is call the RSPCA. When faced with the anomalous situation of seeing the animal body in the art gallery, people follow the visual cues of the artwork to find the closest institutionalised mode through which to understand it. In this case, the starving scabies-ridden dog is reminiscent of an image from an animal rights campaign, where the disturbing image would be accompanied by instructions as to how one can help prevent such injustices by 'signing the petition' or 'donating to the cause.' The anecdotal accounts of this exhibition that circulated the Internet clearly called for this response, and soon there was a

but rather a small range of predictable responses that are sanctioned by visual cues in the installation space. See Kate Mondlock, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. 25-26.

²⁵ As Lambert Zuidervaart explains, in contemporary Western society the artist is understood both in terms of the modern ideal wherein the artist's genius is uncorrupted by cultural influences and the somewhat democratic notion that the artist is the voice of society. As one who reads society from a position of detachment, the artist is thought to serve humanity in spite of institutional decrees and popular opinion. The artist is therefore responsible to society not to create the art that they want, but rather the art that they need. Due to their privileged position, the artist should not abuse their power to affect society. See Lambert Zuidervaart, *Art in Public: Politics, Economics and a Democratic Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 251-261.

petition with over a million signatures condemning the installation.²⁶ Yet this was all before anyone had confirmed whether or not the dog had actually been harmed as a part of the exhibition.

In 2001, a group of Canadian art students made a film of themselves torturing a cat to death. In court, it was claimed that the film was an artistic statement aimed to raise awareness about the cruelty of eating meat. The video is presently unavailable to the public, but accounts of its contents have circulated on the internet, and these descriptions are extraordinarily graphic.²⁷ The torture lasted for seventeen minutes and the three teenagers appeared to be enjoying themselves as they put the cat in a noose, cut out one of her eyes with dental tools, and disembowelled her whilst she was still alive and moaning in pain.²⁸ The case attracted widespread condemnation.²⁹ On account of the controversial nature of the case, some amateur film-makers decided to make a documentary about it. Touring internationally, *Casuistry: The Art of Killing a Cat* was screened at the Melbourne International Film Festival.³⁰ Although the documentary did not feature the torture sequence, the film was met with extreme opposition by animal rights groups.³¹ While it was clear that the protesters in question had not seen the film, they were so disgusted by the theme of the film and the concepts it explored that threats were made against the venue screening it. Reportedly, there was a “hefty presence of police and security personnel,” and patrons were “searched by police before entering the theatre.”³²

²⁶ Gerard Couzens, ‘Outrage at “Starvation” of a Stray Dog for Art,’ *The Guardian* (March 30, 2008), at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/mar/30/art.spain>. Accessed 20/04/2011.

²⁷ Anonymous, ‘Canadian Court: Cat Torture is Not Art,’ *Animal Rights.net* (25 June 2003), at <http://www.animalrights.net/tag/jesse-power/>. Accessed 10/01/2012.

²⁸ Canadian Press, ‘Man Sentenced, Released for Role in Cat Killing,’ *CTV.ca* (July 11, 2003), at http://www.ctv.ca/CTVNews/Canada/20030711/cat_killing_030711/. Accessed 20/04/2011.

²⁹ See, for example, Freedom for Animals, *Kensington Cat Cruelty Video Case*, at <http://www.oocities.org/casuistry2004/>. Accessed 10/01/2012.

³⁰ User review by ‘Killerspudd’, ‘Average Film,’ *IMDb - Casuistry: The Art of Killing a Cat (2004)*, (July 24, 2005), at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0423969/>. Accessed 12/04/2011.

³¹ Protests were also held at the Toronto Film Festival. Lesli Bisgould, ‘Power and Irony: One Tortured Cat and Many Twisted Angles to Our Moral Schizophrenia about Animals,’ in *Animal Subjects*, pp. 266-267.

³² User reviews by ‘johnnycourageous’, ‘I Cannot See What All the Fuss is About...’ *IMDb - Casuistry: The Art of Killing a Cat (2004)*, (July 24, 2005), at

The teenagers responsible for the cat's death were charged as criminals, and the 'art' defence did nothing to help their case.³³ As in the case of Vargas' dog, protests against the Canadian teens expressed outrage over animal cruelty, but also their abuse of artist's privilege. In terms of public outcry, and the reaction to *Casuistry* in particular, if the impression is created that something horrific is being depicted, then members of the public will condemn it based on that impression alone. The technicalities of what is actually happening can easily become obscured in the midst of such emotionally charged debates, and a society may use controversial artworks as a means to express broader social values that exceed the parameters of the artwork itself. In this sense, artists who claim to be raising awareness about animal cruelty achieve this result by inflaming the public conscience. Yet, where the artist may wish viewers to direct their backlash towards the cruel practices that the art critiques, more often than not it is the artist and the artwork that end up condemned.

The Return of the Abject Through the Affective Arts

As the above examples attest, artists often defend their use of confronting images by arguing that their work attempts to reveal social atrocities, injustices, hypocrisy, and exploitation. Although this defence may not be compelling to an animal liberationist, it is important to consider why some artists believe that their use of animal bodies serves a larger social purpose. In general terms, the use of animal bodies can be viewed as being related to 'abject art' insofar as these bodies are presented in a disturbing fashion, and are designed above all else to shock, repulse, and unnerve. Abject art involves visceral modes of depiction and a particular attraction to both human and animal bodies in their dissected or mutilated state. Inner organs, genitalia, and bodily excretions are exposed without reverence; otherwise, bodies are desecralised through grotesque, unflattering, or humiliating depictions. The political subtext of this aesthetic discourse consists of a refusal to adopt acceptable categories, especially of beauty, and in doing so, represent the social Other who has been excluded from representation in mainstream depictions. The 1993 exhibition "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art," held at the Whitney Museum in New York, encapsulated this approach by drawing

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0423969/>. Accessed 12/04/2011; and 'killerspud', 'Average Film'.

³³ Canadian Press, 'Man Sentenced, Released for Role in Cat Killing.'

on Julia Kristeva's notion of the abjected female body,³⁴ yet the use of the abject has continued in contemporary art in a far broader sense since the 1980s.

For Kristeva, that which is abject is repressed through social power structures. As Winfried Menninghaus observes, the way in which contemporary artists have taken up Kristeva's theory of abjection entails a Freudian understanding of truth:

in light of the operation of unconscious impulses and repressed desires, truth becomes a function not of our propositions and well-rounded sentences but of our slips of tongue, our mistakes and defensive manoeuvres... Truth is henceforth something that *posits itself* in the miscarriage of 'normal' modes of symbolization, in the intermittent language of symptoms.³⁵

Building upon the model of artist-as-social-*provocateur*, this approach necessarily involves the liberation of all that society seeks to repress. For many artists who use animal bodies, the meaning of the work may in fact have nothing to do with animals, yet it is that these bodies are inherently abject that causes them to remain symbolically potent in the communication of other ideas.

What is it, then, that makes animal bodies abject? While that which is 'censored' or omitted from daily life may be understood in terms of repression, anthropologist Mary Douglas' investigation into the nature of social taboos offers an alternative perspective. Douglas' insights are particularly important as her work is focused on the nature of 'dirt' and, when considering abject art, the affective power of that which is dirty or disgusting is thought to be indicative of the corresponding power of the oppressive social construct that is being challenged. In *Purity and Danger*,³⁶ Douglas posits that there is no such thing as dirt, only "matter out of place."³⁷ Regulations regarding 'dirt' and 'impurity' are in force to maintain social boundaries, and are not simply a matter of hygiene, as may be assumed.³⁸ As contemporary Western societies abide by a complex set of unspoken regulations regarding animals, they provide a rich

³⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

³⁵ Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 386.

³⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (Norfolk: Routledge Classics, 2005).

³⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 44.

³⁸ In Douglas' study the regulations in question are religious, yet her theory can be easily applied in regard to any socially constructed regulations.

resource for the artist wishing to exploit such social taboos. It is not uncommon for people to feel that domesticated and well groomed animals should not be allowed inside because they would be 'unclean,' while birds, rats, and stray cats commonly found in urban areas are believed to harbour all manner of diseases. Produce animals are confined to rural areas, and the image of these living animals is completely divorced from the cuts of meat found at the butcher. As animal rights activists have long argued, people apply completely different ethical frameworks in regard to animals and few are able to overcome the compartmentalisation inherent in the day-to-day interactions between humans and diverse animal populations.³⁹

While much more could be said about animals and social taboos, it is sufficient here to note that by using a real animal body, the artist has access to a whole new range of meanings that were not available when one could only *depict* animals and draw upon a classical symbolic repertoire. Regardless of what the artist chooses to do with the body, it is already powerful through being 'out of place.' In addition, real flesh, no matter what species, bears an obvious resemblance to human flesh. Where the body is dissected, propped up in ridiculous poses, or made to signify that which the artist determines, the flagrant disrespect evidenced in these actions amplifies the affective qualities of the artwork by exploiting taboos about death and the proper treatment of the body. In his consideration of the role of disgust in aesthetics, Menninghaus argues that disgust has become a desirable attribute for contemporary artists because of the violence of the sensation, as well as its ability to bypass the ordinary processes of reflection and to affect the viewer at an instinctual level.⁴⁰ Similarly, Noël Carroll has noted that contemporary film makers have become more interested in triggering physical reactions in their audience when the artist seeks to engage with the body of the viewer, which requires extreme images that can stimulate a body to produce adrenalin, tears, sexual fluids, or even the urge to vomit.⁴¹ At one level, abject art and similar movements in contemporary film can be viewed in terms of liberation from socially oppressive frameworks, as artists seek to disturb the normative systems that operate unchecked within the individual. Yet at another level, abject art is primarily concerned with affect, base reactions, and an embodied experience of

³⁹ See, for example, Michael Allen Fox, *Deep Vegetarianism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), p. 43.

⁴⁰ Menninghaus, *Disgust*, pp. 42-44.

⁴¹ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 146-191.

aesthetics that is not necessarily conducive to moral reflection.⁴² In terms of the questions that this article seeks to address, it is important to distinguish the artist's putative intended ethical message (for instance, the Canadian art students' message that people are hypocritical in regard to animal death and that they should adopt vegetarianism) from the message the viewer is capable of perceiving. That is, the affective experience may be so strong that it does not allow for the type of ethical reflection that the artist claims is being provided.

Some of the artists considered in this article may cite their ethical aims, yet for artists like Damien Hirst, that which is disturbing, disgusting, and affective need not contain a moral subtext. In terms of the contemporary art scene, Hirst has attained notoriety by introducing the slaughtered animal corpse into the experience of the gallery-goer. Although many of Hirst's works have contained the time-based element of rot or insect interaction,⁴³ he is most famous for his formaldehyde pieces. These include a fully-grown shark suspended in a tank of greenish liquid, cows that have been sliced lengthways revealing their inner organs, and a whole range of animals cut into multiple sections across their body so that one can walk in between them. While Hirst may not claim that his works are primarily concerned with liberation, social injustice, and power structures, the impact of his work can be explained in terms of Douglasian notions of 'dirt' and Goffman's frame analysis. That is, Western society has a diverse range of contextual frameworks that one may apply in different situations where one is placed in relationship with an animal body; as Douglas observes, that which is 'out of place' or dislocated from its ordinary conceptual framework is perceived to be dirty or offensive. As such, Hirst's work derives much of its affective power from the conflation of incongruous frameworks that govern human-animal relationships. Although people have found Hirst's formaldehyde pieces disturbing, the reaction to the time-based work is arguably greater. There is something in the sterility of formaldehyde that exerts control over the potentially disruptive force of an animal corpse in the gallery space. I would argue that the initial reaction of shock instigated in cases of seeing animal bodies 'out of place' is soothed by recourse to the nearest concept of control available in the viewer's mind. As the image of animal bodies in formaldehyde or in taxidermy form has an

⁴² Menninghaus, *Disgust*, pp. 43.

⁴³ For instance, Hirst's *A Thousand Years* installation featured a rotting cow's head in a glass cabinet that was systematically devoured by maggots who grow into flies before swarming towards the 'insect-o-cutor' installed in the upper section of the cabinet. Damien Hirst, *A Thousand Years*, 1990. Steel, glass, flies, maggots, mdf, insect-o-cutor, cow's head, sugar, water, 213 x 427 x 213cm.

established institutionalised history in scientific research, museum collections, and medical contexts, these traditions can be accessed mentally to re-establish the broken social boundary.

Art can be devised to bring about a variety of emotional responses, and while the use of the animal body is unsettling in itself, the emotional tone of a piece will also influence viewer response. The 2008 Biennale was a case in point, as Parr's violent image of decapitation created a suitably anxious audience response, yet the peaceful repose of Maurizio Cattelan's taxidermied horse merely allowed for feelings of stasis or sadness. Certainly, the relationship between abject art and the affective aesthetic qualities of the animal body is evident in all cases discussed in this article to a certain degree. Unlike some of the more extreme examples mentioned, however, many contemporary artists use animal bodies to evoke a sense of beauty or humour. Here, the animal body may not cause the more violent emotions of shock or disgust, yet the body retains an aura of incongruity that furnishes the artwork with a sense of the uncanny. Again, these works may be "more about art than [they are] about animals,"⁴⁴ yet in terms of the contextual frame that the viewer may apply, these works may engender a different kind of response altogether.

MONA and the Theatre of Shock

In January 2011, millionaire David Walsh opened the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Tasmania. Featuring his private collection, MONA is practically a conceptual artwork in itself. Set on the banks of the Derwent River, the gallery is architecturally stunning, combining the site's original architecture with ultra modern geometrical forms. Deliberately organised so spectators are forced to wander the building's labyrinthine interior unguided by signage, information about the pieces can only be accessed via the "O" (an iPod-like device that allows one to "Love" or "Hate" the artwork and to explore such options as "Artwank"). The premises are equipped with a first class restaurant and designer accommodation, as well as a device in the lavatory that allows you to inspect your own anus. Walsh reportedly had plans to incorporate an onsite abattoir into the dining experience as well as a skate ramp and cemetery, yet none of these plans have gone ahead as yet.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Mike Parr in Etherington, 'Animal Rights and Artistic Freedom.'

⁴⁵ Amanda Lohrey, 'High Priest: David Walsh and Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art,' *The Monthly* (December 2010-January 2011), at <http://www.themonthly.com.au/arts-letters-amanda-lohrey-high-priest-david-walsh-and-tasmania-s-museum-old-and-new-art-2918>. Accessed 13/04/2011.

Walsh's collection reflects his dark sense of humour and the delight he takes in shocking his visitors. Currently, one can find a suicide bomber's mangled corpse made from dark chocolate, rotting meat hung on a metal frame, machines that emulate the human digestive system that defecate once a day, and a room for 'over fifteens' called the "Sex and Death Room." While Mike Parr's *MIRROR/ARSE* provoked some negative press over the use of shocking imagery, MONA is being praised as the 'next big thing' in Australian art. Several works in the collection feature animal bodies, including Jan Kounellis' *Untitled* (1998),⁴⁶ Oleg Kulik's *Family of the Future* (1997),⁴⁷ Damien Hirst's *Cholera Seed: The Martyrdom of Saint Thomas* (2003),⁴⁸ Julia DeVille's *Kitten Trophy Rug* (2005)⁴⁹ and *Cinerarium* (2009),⁵⁰ and a *Mummified Cat*⁵¹ from ancient Egypt (c. 664-30 BCE). While some of these works are designed to provoke controversy, others are not, and it is important to remember that these pieces are presented in a unique context that significantly effects their public reception.

In order to explore the ways in which the MONA collection engenders a particular mode of spectatorship, film theorist Tom Gunning's concept of the 'cinema of attractions' may shed some light on the lack of controversy generated by this provocative collection thus far. As noted previously, the viewer is often understood to be a passive figure. While the earliest audiences of cinema have been depicted as naïve and credulous because they screamed and reared back when presented with a filmic image of an oncoming train, Gunning argues that an aesthetic of shock need not imply that the audience cannot tell the difference between reality and illusion. As he points out, cinema emerged in the era of magic theatre, a period which relied on "a widespread decline in a belief in the marvellous, providing a fundamental rationalist context. The magic theatre laboured to make visual that which was impossible

⁴⁶ Jan Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1998. Iron, meat, ropes, steel hooks, 354 x 782 cm.

⁴⁷ Oleg Kulik, *Family of the Future*, 1997. Digital print, performance based photograph, 150 x 150 cm.

⁴⁸ Damien Hirst, *Cholera Seed: The Martyrdom of Saint Thomas*, 2003. Flies and resin on canvas, 137 x 102 cm.

⁴⁹ Julia de Ville, *Kitten Trophy Rug*, 2005. Kitten pelt with metallic kid-leather backing, glass eyes, diamonds, akoya pearl, 27 x 17 x 3 cm.

⁵⁰ Julia de Ville, *Cinerarium*, 2009. Australian Forest Raven, silver, marcasite, black diamonds, jarrah, human ash, wood, glass, velvet, human hair, tulle, muslin, dimensions variable.

⁵¹ *Mummified Cat*. Egypt, Late Period to Ptolemaic, c. 664–30 BCE. Animal remains in linen wrappings and gesso mask, 68 x 11 x 13 cm.

to believe.”⁵² As a result, early cinema can be understood as a “cinema of attractions,” that is, “a series of visual shocks” wherein “realism was valued largely for its uncanny effects.”⁵³

A notable example of the type of early film Gunning is referring to is Thomas Edison’s *Electrocuting an Elephant* from 1903. In this short film, a large crowd surrounds an elephant that has killed three of its trainers and has been condemned to death. The moment of execution involves a massive electrical pulse, and then the elephant topples over, dead. The elephant had been a circus animal on display for the public as an exotic creature. This mixture of exoticism and spectacle can be found in many of the popular entertainments of this period as well as aesthetic traditions related to taxidermy and the *cabinet de curiosités*. As previously discussed, through a Douglasian framework, one can see why certain images instigate shock, but it is possible for shock to do different things to a viewer. The 2008 Biennale focused on the revolutionary potential of shock, however an aesthetics of shock can also act as a pleasing source of exhilaration. As the cinema of attractions relied upon the fusion of rationality and irrationality, viewers could feel the strange pleasure of an anomaly within a controlled environment. In many ways the recent resurgence in taxidermy in contemporary art and fashion draws upon this, and in the MONA collection, DeVille’s pieces are a prime example. Overall, the MONA collection may be visceral, challenging, and ultimately instrumental in provoking dialogue about contentious issues, yet it is also a collection that is ostensibly spectacular, and Walsh himself has dubbed it a “subversive Disneyland.”⁵⁴

The process involved in the transformation from animal to meat is also highly censored in Australian society, and Jan Kounellis’ *Untitled* (1998) focuses on this taboo by displaying raw meat in the gallery space. Although Walsh’s proposed abattoir targeted this by specifically seeking to reveal the entire process for his meat-eating patrons, Kounellis’ work is challenging in a different way. While Hirst’s use of formaldehyde sanitises the threat of the animal corpse, Kounellis’ body parts are allowed to rot for three days before being replaced. As a perceived site of disease, the animal body must be routinely purified, deloused, and perfumed in preparation for contact with

⁵² Tom Gunning, ‘An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,’ in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997), p. 117.

⁵³ Gunning, ‘An Aesthetic of Astonishment,’ p. 116.

⁵⁴ David Walsh quoted in Lohrey, ‘High Priest: David Walsh and Tasmania’s Museum of Old and New Art.’

humans. As meat, this body must be cleanly cut according to prescribed traditions; it must be hairless, cold, and appropriately hued. The popularity of organic meat in gastronomic circles has taken the concept of purity even further as the healthy lifestyle of the animal is now considered essential to the nutritional value of the meat.⁵⁵ The meat that has given over to decay, however, is both useless and reminiscent of the invasive experiences of food poisoning. As an artwork, the danger posed by rotting meat is harnessed in order to press some other message on the viewer that may be found via metaphor. Despite feelings of danger encapsulated in Kounellis' work, the visual link between this meat, and meat commonly found in a butcher shop, is obvious. Paradoxically, if a segmented animal can be conceived of as meat, the regimentation and sterilisation at work in the meat industry can diffuse the power of the image.

Just as the visual link with the meat industry provides an institutionally accepted mode of human-animal interaction, the use of taxidermy in recent art has proved socially acceptable for similar reasons. Drawing on the Victorian aesthetic of *curiosités*, Australian artist and jeweller Julia DeVille creates eccentrically beautiful pieces made from the bodies of cats, birds, bats, and mice. In an era that falls in the wake of the anti-fur movement, taxidermy is bound to prove unpopular amongst animal rights groups no matter how familiar its tradition may be. It is for this reason that DeVille and similar artists like Angela Singer and Emily Valentine Bullock promote awareness of their methods and emphasise the ethical nature of their practice. New Zealand artist and animal rights activist Angela Singer uses second-hand taxidermy-hunting trophies, and decorates them in gruesome ways in order to remind people of the process involved in their creation. DeVille professes to use only those animals that have died from natural causes, and she seeks to preserve the beauty of the animal whilst incorporating the uncanny element of death. Bullock creates similarly quirky pieces using dead pets and found animals. Yet Bullock has also started trapping and killing Indian mynahs to use in her work, stating that killing the birds is environmentally ethical as they are registered pests.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ A recent study of consumers of red meat found that people judge meat by its aesthetic attributes and by ethical factors such as its status as organic. Consumers frequently expected a qualitative difference in taste and nutritional value where the meat was associated with ethical factors such as environmental friendliness. See Yalcin Bozkurt, Melvut Gul, and Gulay Hiz, 'Review on Consumer Perception of Organically Produced Red Meat and Meat Quality,' *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2011), pp. 497-502.

⁵⁶ Although I present the taxidermy of these three artists as socially acceptable, there was some opposition to Bullock's work being exhibited at the Tin Sheds Gallery in

When considering the MONA collection as a whole, shock and confrontation are implicit in the viewing experience. In terms of the animal body, however, the works in Walsh's collection have not (as yet) brought about public debate over animal cruelty. No doubt, if the abattoir had gone ahead, this would have incited controversy, but the use of taxidermy and meat do not enter into dangerous territory in terms of social boundaries in the same way that Mike Parr's chicken did. Again, it becomes evident that the mood of the piece heavily influences viewer response. There is nothing violent in Kounellis' hocks of meat that would make one imagine the painful death of the animal. By the same token, DeVille's work confers a level of respect towards the animal body by preserving its haunting beauty. As a point of comparison, Australian artist Adam Cullen, who is better known for his paintings, once stuffed a road kill cat and presented it as an artwork called *The Otherness When it Comes* (1992-3).⁵⁷ While the result was apparently a "combination of humour and pathos",⁵⁸ the body of this cat looked stiff and uncomfortable with its pipe-cleaner antennae and toothpaste-smearred face. Viewing Cullen's cat beside a work by DeVille and then one by Singer, Cullen's cat can seem cruel due to the undignified manner in which he has preserved the cat. Singer's may appear to be disrespectful due to her grotesque depiction, yet this response can be corrected by the revelation that she is an animal activist. DeVille's might look charming or creepy, depending on one's taste, but her respect for the integrity of the animal's form is evident throughout most of her work. As none of these three artists are guilty of cruelty, and as they have had no impact upon the health or happiness of the animals in question, ethical distinctions based upon the aesthetics of respect may seem somewhat arbitrary.

Conclusion

As this article has noted, the use of animal bodies in contemporary art is contentious, regardless of whether a live animal was harmed in the creation of the artwork or not. One might thus conclude that existing cruelty laws are sufficient to deal with those particular instances where an artist goes too far

Sydney, January 2009, due to her use of dead animals. See The National Association for the Visual Arts Ltd., *Art Censorship Guide: What you Should Know about Threats to Artistic Freedom and How to Deal with Them* (Sydney: National Association for the Visual Arts Ltd., 2009), p. 15.

⁵⁷ Adam Cullen, *The Otherness When it Comes*, 1992-3. Dead cat, fabric, dimensions variable.

⁵⁸ Ingrid Periz, *Adam Cullen: Scars Last Longer* (Fishermans Bend: Craftsman House, 2004), p. 25.

and where it can be proven that they have caused pain and suffering to a live animal. This pragmatic approach, however, does not address broader ethical concerns regarding the use of animals as art materials. Due to the trend in contemporary art to cultivate intense affective experiences, animal bodies have become powerful tools for the exploitation of social taboos regarding both human-animal relations, and the treatment of the dead. I have accounted for the different types of affective experiences related to particular artworks by speculating upon the interplay of common contextual frameworks that govern human-animal relations in Western society. In general, those artworks that generate the most intense opposition from animal rights advocates are designed to generate feelings of anxiety in the viewer, or to lead the viewer to believe that cruelty is actually taking place. At one level, the protest response may be regarded as a part of the artwork's design, wherein the artist wishes to generate public comment about animal rights. Nevertheless, the intense affective experiences designed by the artist utilise the animal body as a symbolic vehicle for other messages that have nothing to do with animals *per se*.

To return to the opening question of this article, it appears that the limits of the aesthetic form lie at the boundary between the conceptual frameworks of the illusory space of the artwork and the 'real' world. This is simply because the art space engenders a particular contextual framework that has specific rules, and the viewer perceives the artwork taking certain things for granted. Therefore, what is often *assumed* is that the artist is a uniquely perceptive and virtuous being, who is ethically bound to refrain from causing harm in their artistic process, and who is also responsible for the effect that their symbolic creations have upon the populace. By seemingly violating this unspoken rule, the artist may find that the conceptual paradigm has shifted its frame from art-world symbolism to real-world symbolism, where illusions of cruelty can be taken far more literally, and artworks that have nothing to do with animal rights discourse can be taken as strong statements on the issue. As such, the aesthetic deployment of animal bodies may be limited in terms of the meanings that can be conveyed to the viewing public.

In terms of the politics of representation, it was noted that the move towards the "abject" in contemporary art stemmed from a desire to represent the abject Other that had been systematically silenced and concealed through the depiction of the beautiful. Artists who are interested in affecting instinctual responses of disgust, anxiety, or repulsion in their viewers use a variety of tools for this common purpose. Therefore, the use of animal bodies should not be viewed in isolation. Most often, however, the exploitation of social taboos for affective purposes tends to incite opposition from groups who are concerned with such specifics, whether this involves animal rights groups condemning the

use of animals in art, child protection groups protesting against the depiction of minors, or religious groups railing against the use of sacrilegious imagery. Aside from those rare cases where the artist has committed a criminal act in the creation of their artwork, such passionate debates may be more accurately judged to be arguments about the ethics of symbolic representation and the shaping of social values. Insofar as contemporary artists use animals to represent the silenced Other or issues of a human-to-human political nature, it appears that animal bodies can only act as symbolic vehicles for artistically determined meaning to those who are versed in the symbolic language of contemporary art.

For artists who wish neither to represent a silenced Other nor comment on human-animal relationships, measures must be taken to insulate the meanings imbued in their creations from the sting of animal rights rhetoric. As is clear from the type of animal-based artworks held in the MONA collection, the affect of exploiting animal-taboos may not carry a strong political message, but may be put to use in order to bring about visceral sensations of pleasurable horror, humorous repulsion, or a sense of the uncanny. In many cases, artists who are not aiming to incite controversy so much as an intense audience reaction will publicise their methods and/or ethical stance on animal cruelty to stave off potential misunderstandings. Unlike other industries that may argue that their use of animal bodies is justified for various pragmatic reasons, the artist can only argue that the symbolic power of the animal is being employed for the greater good of society. Despite the fact that in other contexts, people may apply a far less idealised attitude towards the use of animals, the power that art has to magnify significance means that the ‘cruel’ treatment of a single animal may be viewed to be utterly abhorrent, regardless of a person’s apparent indifference to animal welfare in other situations. At a time in contemporary art when it is very difficult to shock or affect the viewer, the animal body has retained its ability to trigger a strong reaction. Still, given that social taboos spark predictable responses, it remains to be seen whether artists can exploit taboos associated with the animal body entirely for their own purposes.