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**An Exploration of GoodWork in Contemporary
Visual Art**

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Introduction

Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon describe GoodWork as “work of expert quality that benefits the broader society.”¹ The GoodWork model grew from an interest in researching how “GoodWork” - work that is both excellent in quality and socially responsible - can be carried out within diverse professional realms, given pervasive challenges in contemporary society: rapid technological advancement, overpowering market forces, and the decline of any one dominant ethical doctrine. In the book, *Good Work*, the authors develop and apply their analysis to genetics and journalism. They find that while the universe of genetics is well *aligned*, with all relevant forces sharing a common goal of ensuring healthier and longer lives for people, such is not the case for journalism. Within the *misaligned* universe of journalism, participants—including the profession itself (the domain), its practitioners (the field), and society at large—have conflicting goals. For example, journalists themselves hold onto an ideal of in-depth investigative reporting, while those who own media outlets seek greater profits through promoting gossip and scandal. And, although misalignment signifies disturbances in a professional realm, the authors also suggest that its disequilibrium may serve to expose threats to GoodWork, and consequently motivate people to strive toward high standards, reaffirm personal identities, and re-discover “the essence of their calling” in order to establish authentic alignment.²

The GoodWork model has drawn attention to an important set of concerns, and yet, because it has focused on the more “traditional” professions, the question

is how the GoodWork model might apply to the less traditional professions, where the possibilities for distinct shared missions and specific training trajectories are less obvious. Given the amount of controversy that has surrounded the various manifestations of “art work” in the last few decades, discussing GoodWork in art is subject to acute challenges. The realm of contemporary art is particularly challenging, since standards are anything but concrete and their very existence is also questionable. Art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto explicitly describes the current predicament of contemporary art. He asserts how the eye is now “philosophically useless” in visual art since one can no longer distinguish whether something is art merely by looking.³ In absence of any formal or theoretical constraints, there are few restrictions as to what constitutes a work of art and moreover, who is or is not an artist. The aim of this paper is neither to define “art” nor to look for examples of what might be “good art”; its purpose is to explore how GoodWork might be carried out within the realm of contemporary visual art. Art also falls appropriately into the discourse of “GoodWork in difficult times.”⁴

The GoodWork model maintains that for a domain to be recognized by society as a profession it must possess dimensions of knowledge, practice, and ethics for use towards desirable goals and common interests.⁵ The model states: “if a profession cannot convince others that its practices and values are useful, and that its members can be trusted, it will not be given much social support.”⁶ Consequently, if the profession cannot gain credibility within society it is marginalized in culture and deprived of resources.⁷ Given the absence of any professional certification, what constitutes the art profession is vague. With such ambiguity at a time when the notion of art itself is experiencing challenges more

extreme than ever before, the public has begun to question the practices, values, and usefulness of art and has become suspicious of public resources spent for its promotion.

Focusing on recent developments in contemporary Western art, the GoodWork model will be applied and challenged. The various perspectives of members in the professional realm of contemporary art will be considered as well as the roles of art and artists within the fabric of society. Given the particular nature of the art profession, which will be discussed in this paper, I suggest that Good Work in contemporary art does not necessarily result from a perfect fit into the conditions proposed by the authors of *Good Work*, but rather from the generative discourse between the irregularities within the art profession and the model for GoodWork. Although the art field seems more chaotic and unanchored than more traditional realms such as medicine and journalism, I maintain that viewing art from the perspective of cultural practice will serve as foundation for seeing it in a more unified manner. This in turn lends itself to being viewed from a GoodWork perspective.

Consequently, a critical approach to the model for GoodWork is required. I will address two fundamental difficulties derived from my analysis for assessing GoodWork as defined by the authors in the realm of contemporary visual art. The polyphony of voices within the art universe will be considered and the conversation between the profession and the model will be examined. I will use the example of the recent exhibition *Sensation* to discuss the various challenges faced by the art profession and argue that the controversy surrounding the exhibition was misdirected, as reflected in the bounty of media articles

commenting on the exhibition. Furthermore, and as exemplified by *Sensation*, misconceptions of what GoodWork ought to be in art both drive and impede the profession. Finally, I will explore the meaning and relevance of social responsibility for practicing artists in contemporary society.

Excellence: A Polyphony of Contrasting Voices

In my research, I have derived two fundamental difficulties in assessing GoodWork in contemporary visual art. 1) While art can be regarded as a profession with a domain and field of practice, the values and ethical dimensions of the domain are not clearly defined. Furthermore, the make-up of the profession has unique complexities apart from more clear-cut professional realms, like medicine, which have more concrete collective missions and standards. In the case of art, the practitioners in the field arguably include not only the makers of art but also the thinkers: critics, philosophers, and historians. The thinkers are not necessarily the makers and the makers are not necessarily the thinkers. Artists existed long before other art-related “players,” which were largely the product of the advent of newspapers and universities. This may be a contributing factor to disharmony in the domain, with artists often resenting judgement by “experts” who are not artists themselves. The potential for disparities in knowledge and experience, of artistic skills and training, and in theory and practice amongst those who make up the field makes delineating the domain difficult. Additionally, the prevailing notion of arts as leisure also threatens the integrity of the profession. Since realms differ in how central or peripheral they are with respect to the current

priorities of a community, artists who may be genuinely engaged in doing work risk being over-looked by an uninterested and distrustful public. The public is thus another vital component of the art field, whether or not each individual member of the community participates in art since much of what is contested in the field has to do with government tax-funded sponsorship in the form of direct artist grants or the funding of art institutions.

2) The difficulties in defining the domain in contemporary art derive from the fact that the art profession is in continuous misalignment and might even thrive on it, in which case authentic alignment as “an ideal worth striving for”⁸ is a questionable goal. Though misalignment is both positive and negative to the field, I am inclined to believe that it serves art more so than it hinders it. The presence of misalignment empowers the field through constant internal (field) and external (stakeholders) re-evaluation but also trivializes it, given the instability of such ephemeral foundations. As Gardner, et al. note, journalists desire alignment in their profession; among many contemporary artists, however, the goal is *not* authentic alignment. Art is not a “harmonious professional realm” and its practitioners are not certain that it should be one.

The GoodWork model suggests that because most professions attend to ongoing human needs, it is rare for any one profession to fade away entirely.⁹ The model also suggests that two main forms of dysfunction threaten the breakdown of professional realms: **anomie**, reflecting the breakdown of norms to the extent that nobody can any longer distinguish the right thing to do, and **alienation**, when norms become rigid and oppressive and nobody desires to do the work that has to be done.¹⁰ I suggest that both phenomena exist in the realm of art, where critics,

historians, and philosophers -those who seek to make sense of art-making within current and historical contexts- and the public, are faced with some kind of anomie in constructing meaning out of unconventional forms of art. Artists, on the other hand, experience an element of alienation, as has been the case in the constructed history of Western art, throughout which distinguished artists have defined themselves by rejecting prevailing norms and standards, within both the domain of art and in society.

The GoodWork model recommends that thoughtful practitioners consider three basic issues: 1) a domain's **mission**, or core values; 2) a domain's **standards** of work quality and professional conduct; and 3) one's **identity**, meaning a person's disposition and sense of purpose, moral, philosophical and otherwise. Right at the core it would seem difficult for those in the realm of art to give any common definition to mission or standards. The issue of identity is the only concrete possibility and could be based on personal integrity and values, not necessarily on any agreed upon values by others in the profession. It is stated in the GoodWork model that becoming a professional involves a bargain between a person and the community. People agree to provide needed services, the community agrees to compensate them for the services and recognize their right to perform them. There is a mismatch between what the public expects from such artist professionals, some of whom are sponsored by public tax money in the form of NEA grants, and what is actually produced and displayed in the public realm. The longstanding notion of visual art as product prevails in society but is not reflective of current approaches of practitioners. To understand how the field of

art operates and the unique challenges it faces as a professional realm, the differing expectations of its members must be considered.

Historians, Philosophers, and Critics

Never has the traditional notion of the visual arts been more challenged in the documented history of Western art than in the last three decades. The increasing variety and acceptance of what can be considered artistic expression unrelentingly undermines the deep-rooted aesthetic approach to making and appreciating art. Non-conventional artists in the last thirty years have revived a deconstructive and critical view of art. Their efforts have even surpassed those of their predecessors in Dada and Surrealism, and more recently in Pop Art, who similarly sought to challenge and de-stabilize conventional notions of art.¹¹ Each successive movement in art over the centuries has followed the trend of negating current values and searching for new, quintessential standards appropriate for the times. While the last thirty years has been no exception, certain artistic innovations have extended such trends, resulting in work that is “intractably avant-garde” in its limit-defining nature and unwillingness to be absorbed by any artistic canon.¹² This paper focuses on contemporary art of the avant-garde.

In comparison to traditional fine-artists, avant-garde artists reject established practices and are controversial in their efforts to overthrow established notions of art. Whereas traditional fine-art practices remain relatively stable, the art of the avant-garde is of interest because it is often shunned at its conception and praised for innovation with the passing of time. It is conceivable that what we are currently seeing in the realm of art will not be what will count in retrospect as

representative of the “art of our times”. Perhaps what we are witnessing is the epitome of market-driven production, where *recognized* artist practitioners are pressured to compete with media and entertainment, and to engage in shock tactics and technology in order to draw in attention. Just as Van Gogh never sold a painting during his lifetime, perhaps the artists who will emerge as the ‘true creative individuals’ for the twenty-first century will not be identified until we are further into the future. In any case, it is still important to study what is currently visible in art, regardless of whether these artistic directions withstand the test of time, because it reflects what is visible to us within our culture.

According to philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto, the avant-garde art of *our* times differs from that of the past because it defines limits that will always be limits. Unlike previous movements in art history, Danto claims that society will never regard such intractably avant-garde art with a reversal of taste and appropriate it into the realm of the aesthetically pleasing.¹³ The art of *our* times will never assume a complacent spot in the ‘timeline’* of art’s progression.¹⁴ Danto identifies two factors that proliferated the development of such non-conventional art in the last thirty years. The first was the abandonment of painting as the main artistic medium for more ephemeral embodiments of art, such as performance, installation, and body art. The second was the growing use of art by artists to address social and political issues, such as political reformation and gender

* At the most basic level, art history tries to delineate the borders of its subject by identifying styles, marking beginnings and ends, and assuming the Hegelian notion of history as the performance of re-determined solutions to what appears, in hindsight, to have been a common problem. Therefore the whole notion of timeline and successive movements in art history reflect more the biases of contemporaries and historians and the desire to fulfil the valued notion of progress and advancement in accordance with the “spirit of the times”. Danto’s claim of the un-lasting value of this art might therefore be interpreted as a comment of the limits of

equity.¹⁵ Whereas historical examples even of the avant-garde depict groups of artists working towards common goals, aesthetics, and values, such commonalities are not the trend in contemporary art-making. Instead, art has become more individualistic, conducted according to personal values and goals. Creative forms of artistic expression and participation in social critique both solidified artists' identities within society and divided society's understanding of artists' work and of art itself as a unified realm. Thomas McEvilley coins the last thirty years in art as "The Age of Chaos," where pluralism prevails and art is viewed from a deconstructive and critical perspective.¹⁶

Artists

Art has always functioned to some degree or another as a "mirror test" for society. Contemporary artworks often take this function one large step further and "deliberately try to de-stabilize our social or moral equilibrium by confronting us with images we neither expect, nor are prepared for, in the art context."¹⁷ It is appropriate that contemporary art refuses to fit neatly into any kind of model, including the model for GoodWork, since part of the profession's very purpose is to question notions of norms and standards. In fact, within the realm of contemporary art of the sort that so fundamentally challenges the idea of art (and life) itself, the notion of certainty is not an appreciated value; instead there is an engagement with uncertainty and contradiction, an attempt to understand *lack of meaning*, and a preference for potentiality over actuality.¹⁸ Art serves to raise

what human beings are willing to confront and have reflected in their history rather than a comment of the quality of the work being produced.

awareness of the self as questioner, interpreter of 'facts', meaning-maker, and constructor of reality.

As with other professions, market forces have the potential to both contribute positively and negatively toward the shaping of the art profession. British artist Damien Hirst describes the divide between the art profession and the practice of art, stating: "art is about life and the art world is about money, and they are separate things."¹⁹ This conundrum between art, life, and the art profession reveals an important force at work: the market. The interconnectedness of market forces and art-making indicates that while the artistic profession does not exactly match the GoodWork model for a profession, market forces remain a common concern. The tension between art and the art profession can be applied even to more defined professions such as medicine, in which physicians who may value the Hippocratic Oath must follow HMO guidelines based on the bottom line.²⁰ The distinction between "art" and the "art world" made by Hirst implies how easily artistic integrity and sincerity of the artist fall into peril; with such a distance between art and the so-called art world, the suspicion with which the public regards art-making is warranted. Working within the unstable conditions of the profession, artists who enter the professional realm may find the need to make a living conflicting with their artistic intentions. Conversely, artists like Hirst and Jeff Koons openly admit their role as producers for a profession thwarted by conflicts of fame, money, and commercialization.

The identity of an artist is also tenable: is an artist professional simply defined by whether one makes money from one's art? The answer seems to shift depending on whether it is asked within the current context or in retrospect. For

example, those people I know who make art but have never sold anything hesitate to call themselves artists. Although Van Gogh never sold anything in his lifetime, there is no doubt in hindsight, that he was an artist.

I offer some thoughts on additional perspectives of the artists. From reviewing the literature and pre-existing published interviews with numerous artists, the expectations of practicing contemporary artists can be discerned. Practicing avant-garde artists seek to challenge the establishment and raise “shocks of awareness to which the arts give rise”²¹ in order to stimulate thinking and questioning outside of people’s accustomed worlds. Practicing contemporary artists who do not deviate extremely from traditional media and subject matter can perhaps be regarded as deviant in their avoidance of attention-grabbing avant-garde methods. As a suggestion for further study, it would be useful to explicitly ask other members of the field and both the general and educated public for their expectations of the art profession.

**The Public Stakeholders:
Community, Government, Religion and the controversy over *Sensation***

The explosion of controversial art, of the ‘intractably avant-garde’, in America over the last few decades resulted, in part, from increased government funding by President Johnson (1965) for ‘new and different art’ and increased accessibility to those funds.²² A flourishing economy also helped spread wealth into the realm of art through corporate buying and the rise of private art galleries, to accommodate growing numbers of art investors and collectors.²³ According to

Lisa Phillips, director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, “the NEA’s (National Endowment for the Arts) policy of unrestricted grants to individual artists was crucial to the development of the avant-garde in America,” and allowed for unprecedented inquiry and experimentation in the visual arts and the emancipation from artistic conventions and norms to do with beauty, craftsmanship, and subject matter.²⁴ While Phillips speaks of a kind of liberation felt by artists as a result of economic forces, art critic Hal Foster argues against pluralism in art, which “plays right into the idea of the free market.”²⁵ According to Foster, pluralism is merely a guise for freedom of choice and granting such autonomy to art is equivalent to rendering it useless: “Art becomes an arena not of dialectical dialogue but of vested interests.”²⁶ Within the art profession, market forces create both opportunities for creativity and for the exploitation of sensibilities under the pretext of art. The difficulty and challenge is in delineating what work fits under either of these categories and the possibility that one might fit both. The case of the exhibition *Sensation* encapsulates many of the issues within the professional realm of art discussed so far and particularly provides insight into the effect of multiple players in the field from the public realm.

The GoodWork model states: “another condition for alignment is that the fields should be free to practice within the limits of their respective domains and to expand these limits in a reasoned way.”²⁷ It is evident that within the realm of contemporary art, there are no clear internal standards; this being the case, the existence of any established parameters of practice is also questionable. The model also states that “everyone suffers when religious or political authorities try to control the practices of a professional realm by imposing parameters foreign to it,”

and that such measures can be averted through the application of effective internal standards within the profession.²⁸ The invasion of political and religious authorities into the realm of art in recent years is a clear signal of its unrelenting misalignment, further intensified by the media. This has spurred greater involvement of the general public in the debate, or “scandal,” as the newspapers often headline, of contemporary works of art. An obvious example of the uproar art has caused in recent years is evident in the events surrounding the exhibition: “Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection,” which opened at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (BMA) on October 2nd, 1999. Public dispute centered on the “challenging” nature of the work presented in *Sensation*, while even more controversy and cause for legitimate concern lay in the workings behind the scenes.[†] In essence, the controversy around the exhibition belonged in the arena of museum ethics concerning public trust, since the main issue that should have been of concern was that a publicly funded institution inadvertently spent resources that increased the value of a private collector’s collection and, in effect, subsidized the promotion and selling of his artwork.²⁹

In the public eye, however, Chris Ofili’s painting of *The Holy Virgin Mary* was at the center of debate. The image of the Virgin is ornamented with collage patterned cut-out images of female genitalia from pornography magazines and balls of elephant dung echoing his dot-painting technique, which fills the

[†] The exhibition was at first sponsored by Charles Saatchi, British advertising giant, whose private collection was displayed in the exhibition. He initially gave \$160,000 towards financing the exhibition and later on demanded successfully to be partially re-compensated by the museum. The acquiescence of the BMA in allowing Saatchi to be personally involved in determining how the work was to be displayed lead to thousands of dollars of costs beyond budget. To compensate for the fund shortage, revenue was increased through higher admission prices, reduced services for visitors among which educational programs were compromised, and a shady attempt by the BMA’s director to secure a grant from the Third Millennium

background. Ofili's painting was offensive largely because of the materials used to compose it. There is elephant dung; there are clippings from pornography magazines. Had Mayor Rudolph Giuliani or members of the Catholic League actually seen the painting before reading its description, they would have encountered what is arguably an aesthetically pleasing piece. Without even seeing the exhibition and Ofili's contested work, Giuliani and the Catholic League condemned the exhibition as "blasphemous" and "sick stuff." Mayor Giuliani even went so far as to threaten termination of "the city's annual contribution of \$7.2 million to the Brooklyn Museum for operating expenses (about one-third of its yearly budget); withhold a promised \$20 million for capital improvements; dismiss the museum's trustees; and reclaim the city-owned building that the museum occupies, leaving a priceless collection of art and artefacts homeless,"³⁰ if the exhibition was not cut short or moved to a private venue. Such extreme threats undermine basic principles of the Constitution. Works of art are protected as forms of expression and, moreover, it has been established by a body of legal decisions that while government is not obligated to fund the arts, once it elects to do so it cannot discriminate against any particular point of view.³¹

The scrutiny surrounding *Sensation* by government and religious agencies not only created a lot of grief based on uninformed views about the artwork itself, but the real heart of the matter—and a legitimate cause for concern—was overlooked. The intrusion of religion and politics sparked much emotion and debate. Dennis Heiner, a 72 year-old retired teacher and devout Catholic, smuggled white latex paint in an empty lotion container into the museum and

Foundation.

defaced Ofili's piece, squirting paint on to the painting, and smearing it around with his hands.³² Such active aggression towards a work of art is perhaps one of the real threats posed by the invasion of politics and religion into the professional realm of art. Another questionable result was Giuliani's decency commission (Spring, 2001), a review panel to help regulate the expenditure of public funds on art for public display, otherwise seen as a further attempt to control the art profession from the outside.

While such efforts to control the art profession may have created an impending and threatening mood within the profession, the values of social commentary, contradiction, discourse, and uncertainty were also realized. The denunciation of the work shown and the attempt to 'protect' the public from it had the ironic effect of drawing more people to see the exhibition. As the headline of one *Los Angeles Times* article reads: "Public, lured by hype, flocks to N.Y. art show exhibition: visitors begin queuing up at Brooklyn Museum 3 hours before opening. Protesters also turn out." One viewer was quoted to have said: "Rudy got me here...I was interested in seeing this after what he said."³³ Moreover, a recent survey carried out by David Halle, a sociologist at UCLA, found little evidence to support the censoring of potentially offensive artwork.³⁴ In fact, he discovered a more than adequate self-selection process: those who are likely to be offended do not attend and those who *do* attend are not likely to be offended:

Unless someone draws attention to a controversial piece, people not only failed to get riled by it, they don't remember it...Someone has to make a huge fuss for a specific piece of art to lodge in the public consciousness...Contemporary artists can legitimately attempt to push the boundaries of what is morally, aesthetically, and politically acceptable...This study suggests that the center of gravity of public opinion-both the opinion of those who attend such a show and the opinion of the American public on the relevant issues-point to sensible and reasonable ways of handling such controversies.³⁵

The instance of *Sensation* brought art out of the peripheries into the main scene and into public discourse as a result of the disagreement of individuals from within the field as to how such work should be regarded. Article upon article, written by and presenting the viewpoints of artists, historians, critics, and members of the public, including people of various religions, ethnicities, and political backgrounds, expressed anything but harmony in beliefs and values. In this instance, art became a 'moral adventure' for all parties involved.

Art as Cultural Practice

Given the pluralistic state of contemporary art and the varied perspectives of members of the field, art is subject to a kind of relativism that risks being equated to nihilism.³⁶ While the polyphony of voices is very real, an alternative way of understanding art as a profession is from the perspective of a cultural practice.

The question that pre-occupies a public still engrained in an aesthetic mode of thinking about art, which also applies to one searching for GoodWork in art, is: What makes a *GoodWork* of art? We inherently rely on being able to identify certain tangible qualities when answering this question. But since art has shifted from necessarily being a product to possibly being the embodiment of a process, the criteria have also shifted. Matthew Kieran argues that whether an artwork is "good" or not in any universal sense is irrelevant when discussing contemporary art, since art has become a matter of taste, and the only distinct or rational meaning of such a question has only to do with whether or not it affords an individual

pleasure.³⁷ He alludes to the danger such a mode of thinking imparts, since relativistic thinking is prone to the abolition of value insofar that art becomes meaningless. Kieran reveals the paradox that while it is possible to view art as devoid of any inherent morality or value, it is understood that art is “justifiably subject to and the object of political and social values, which intriguingly are not subjected to the same relativism-equals-nihilism treatment.”³⁸

Kieran suggests an alternative view of relativism in art I believe would serve as a solid basis on which the art profession can attain some grounding while maintaining its dialectical nature. Kieran argues that art is a cultural practice- a distinct activity in our way of life, which necessarily means it has some value.³⁹ Understanding art as a cultural practice means recognizing it as an activity “within and around which it is appropriate to do and categorize various sorts of things...The cultural practice of art and the various traditions within it develop, are modified, or stagnate according to how we undertake and understand them.”⁴⁰ If art did not have some value, it would not be perpetuated, so the relativism seen in art is in fact indicative of some value. Value is a necessary condition for the emergence and evolution of phenomena, and certainly, art continues to emerge and evolve.

I propose to extend Kieran’s argument to include Maxine Greene’s notion of a cultured vision, which emphasizes the cultural context of art and the meaning that emerges as we experience the world by negotiating our own perspectives with the perspective of the artist through interpreting his or her artwork.⁴¹ Art provides us with new perspectives. Art prevails as a cultural practice because its value lies in both the resonant yet often dissonant chords it evokes of the culture in which it

is embedded and upon which it reflects. The value in art exists in its tradition as a cultural practice and both informs and enables us to “open ourselves to new disclosures...to make new interpretations” of the “already constituted reason in which ‘cultured men’ are content to shut themselves, toward a reason which contains its own origins.”⁴²

Within the visual arts, a unique kind of freedom has prevailed. When asked whether he believed there to be a big difference between the art world and the music world, artist Damien Hirst replied: “Yes, the music world is a pile of shit and the art world is fantastically free. Basically in the music world the people who are the furthest away from creativity have the most control...”⁴³ To further elucidate this sense of freedom he feels in the realm of art, he continues: “I can walk into my gallery with a banana stuck to a dog shit and ask Jay what he thinks about it. He can laugh but he has to think twice about it-especially with a good title-he has to look at it, he has to consider it. There are regular moments in the art world where something has been invented and no one knows if it’s good or bad. How fantastic is that?”⁴⁴ In truth, art does provide an arena for people to challenge old belief systems and explore new worlds. According to Kurt Varnedoe, director of the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern art: “Art may be at its most powerful when it sends you away temporarily disoriented but newly attuned to experience.”⁴⁵ While the arts undoubtedly avail society in such a manner, it is recent developments in contemporary art that have been increasingly challenging to the public, stakeholders, and other members of the field. For while Damien Hirst’s suggestion of a banana stuck in dog shit as potential art may seem trivial at first, the form that art has taken in recent years has the tendency to elicit

the same kind of reaction of puzzlement and senselessness in many who hear of it, consisting of such material as elephant dung, menstrual blood, urine, and five percent formaldehyde solution. Amongst the plethora of issues that have raised discontent and much heated debate in the realm of art, an example of pluralism's extent in the arts is in the controversy surrounding the use of unconventional and stigmatized materials in what Danto calls "the art of disturbance":

It is disturbance when the insulating boundaries between art and life are breached in some way the mere representation of disturbing things cannot achieve...It is for this reason that reality must in some way then be an actual component of disturbational art, and usually reality of a kind itself disturbing: obscenity, frontal nudity, blood, excrement, mutilation, real danger, actual pain, possible death⁴⁶

Danto proposes that this kind of art undermines reality in a way that more traditional forms of art have lost the power to achieve.

Ethics: Artists and Social Responsibility

To what extent should an artist consider the public and society? The notion of the experience of art as a moral adventure serves to highlight why it is important to reflect on the role of the artists, of the arts in society, and what it means for an artist to be socially responsible. Carol Becker directly points to the fact that the process of self-definition is itself a political act,⁴⁷ and for a self to be identified implies an inherent larger context from which the self is distinguished and defined. Thus, artists and the work they do are necessarily part of a greater whole. Becker advocates for the necessity of artists to reflect on how their work fits into the broader social framework of which they are a part. She targets the failure of education to teach artists to think about thinking about their work, resulting in

art that is neither thoughtful nor thorough, accessible only to those familiar with the visual code of the art world, and dependant on shallow devices, like shock.⁴⁸ This is not to say that there are no artists who are thoughtful and thorough; certainly there are many, and many who carry out GoodWork. I extend Becker's argument in critiquing the failure of education in incorporating the arts into *general* curricula, and seek to encourage more opportunity for everyone—artists, children, and adults alike—to be more thoughtful and thorough in our thinking. The prevailing romantic mode of art education, which proliferates the notion of the artist as child-like and unable to function in the adult-world, also contributes to the uncertainty of the domain and undermines the seriousness of artistic endeavours.

The notion of social responsibility and the arts has been brought to the foreground following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Artists of all types gathered at a panel discussion entitled, "Sprung from the Ruins: A Panel Discussion on the Arts during a Time of Crisis" at Harvard University on November 9th, 2001, were asked how the events may have impacted the meaning of their work. They were asked to reflect on whether they felt any feelings of triviality being professional artists in light of the very real and traumatizing distress in a post-September 11th world. An important consensus was that art continues to thrive, and that they continued to thrive as artists. Most important to this discussion were the points raised by panel participants, James Taylor (singer/songwriter) and Mandy Patinkin (actor/singer), who indicated a heightened consciousness of their audiences. According to Taylor, who was in the middle of touring during the events, "If anything, it made me more conscious of what I was doing every moment. Everything became deeper. I was more

concerned about the audience reaction, what state they were in.” Patinkin spoke of an artist’s privilege of having an audience and how to put such a privilege towards raising social awareness. Regard for the audience and recognition that art-making is necessarily connected to some larger whole by virtue of existing in the same physical realm is perhaps basic to the notion of social responsibility and contemporary art.

Just as it is difficult to discuss concrete missions and standards in the art profession with regard to the quality of work, so is the case with the idea of what is socially responsible. I have suggested that understanding art as a cultural practice is a possible basis for discussing the value of art. I suggest further that perhaps the parallel basis for discussing social responsibility in art has to do with artists’ considering their role within society and in relation to others, regardless of what their individual philosophy may be. It seems that at the most basic level of social responsibility, the artist should be able to clearly explain the place he or she feels art occupies in society and why. The possibilities range entirely from one who might reject society to one who is deeply committed towards social change. Whatever the position, I feel the articulation of one’s position and reasoning is a crucial form of connection in an essentially disconnected realm. This is not to say that *works of art* must be justified by verbal language but rather *one’s position and purpose* as an artist should be well considered. Requiring an artist to verbally explicate his or her art would undermine the validity of the medium itself as a form of communication.⁴⁹ Becker speaks of the danger of a naïve sense of artistic freedom when it is interpreted as the right to do whatever one desires without considering consequences.⁵⁰ Overcoming the image of artist as naïve and

irresponsibly child-like (not to be confused with the inhibition and freshness of a child-like artistic approach) must occur for the profession to be taken seriously; the key to such a revolution of thought is perhaps in artists taking an active role in reflection and communication of their objectives and philosophies.

Closing Remarks: Education and the Ethical Imperatives of Art

As pluralistic and vanguard in forms and ideas as art may be in the present day, it would appear that limits do in fact exist. Its increasingly contradictory nature and ambiguity provides even more reason for artists to reflect and think seriously about the work they are producing and its place within society. German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen stunned the community and proved the pervasive existence of limits between art and life in his comments regarding September 11th, calling the events “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos.”⁵¹ Clearly, Stockhausen crossed a vital boundary in equating an act of mass murder and art, as is evident in artists’ responses to the comments, calling for the need to “reclaim art from such reckless commentary.”⁵²

In discussing how GoodWork might be carried out in contemporary visual art, two fundamental themes to the conversation have materialized. The first involves understanding the nature of the art domain as one that is ever-expanding with continuous input of creative activity, the merit of which may not be immediately perceptible since creativity is usually recognized over time. The second implicates improved education in the arts in general education. A curriculum integrating the arts would move towards bridging the gap between

contemporary art practice and education in schools and would, above all, encourage critical reflection about content in addition to technique at higher levels of education, in all subject areas. Since a society's values are reflected and perpetuated in school curricula, the value of art depends on the teaching of it as a worthy endeavour that facilitates thought about the self in relation to society and the global community. Even at the most basic level, improved education in the arts would not only cultivate more conscientious artists but also a more informed audience who would be better equipped at making choices in their experiences with art and art's context: society.

In his response to the comments made by Stockhausen, artist Richard Serra articulates: "Mr Stockhausen's desire to compete with the horrendous effects of a terrorist act is a nihilistic distortion of the ethical imperatives to make art."⁵³ His thoughts echo those of Sartre's reflections on writing, which can also be applied to all branches of the arts:

And if I am given this world with its injustices, it is not so I might contemplate them coldly, but that I might animate them with my indignation, that I might disclose them and create them with their nature as injustices, that is, as abuses to be suppressed...at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative...For since the one who writes recognizes, through the very fact he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men.⁵⁴

If one approaches the making and receiving of visual art with such an understanding of the value of its practice and function within society, basic tenets emerge for how GoodWork might be carried out in contemporary visual arts.

Endnotes

- ¹ Howard Gardner et al., *GoodWork: When Excellence and Ethics Meet* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xi.
- ² *Ibid.*, 6.
- ³ Arthur Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Noonday Press, 1992), 9.
- ⁴ Howard Gardner et al., 6.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Gardner et al., 33.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-32.
- ¹¹ Thomas McEvelley, "How is Avant-Garde Art Evaluated: Value in the Age of Chaos," in *Art on the Edge and Over* by Linda Weintraub (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, Inc., 1996), 255.
- ¹² Arthur Danto, "Why does art need to be explained? Hegel, Biedermeier, and the Intractably Avant-Garde," in *Art on the Edge and Over* by Linda Weintraub (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, Inc., 1996), 15.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-16.
- ¹⁶ McEvelley, 256.
- ¹⁷ Joy Sperling, "The Right to Offend and the Power to Provoke: The Role of Controversy in American Art," in *Culture and Democracy*, ed. Andrew Buchwalter (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1992), 223.
- ¹⁸ McEvelley, 257.
- ¹⁹ Francesco Bonami, "Damien Hirst: The Exploded view of the Artist," *Flash Art* 29, no.189 (Summer 1996): 112.
- ²⁰ Gardner et al., 24.
- ²¹ Greene, 134.
- ²² Stephen Goode, "The Fall of Art", *New World Communications, Inc. Insight on the News*, 1 November 1999, 10.
- ²³ Stephen Goode, "The Fall of Art", *New World Communications, Inc. Insight on the News*, 1 November 1999, 10.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Hal Foster, "Against Pluralism," in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, and Cultural Politics*, a collection of essays (Washington, Bay Press, 1985), 15.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Gardner et al., 29.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ Jim Cuno, Guest Lecturer in S-302 Museum Education Seminar, Harvard University, Cambridge, 2 October 2001.
- ³⁰ Stephen Dubin, "How Sensation became a Scandal," *Art in America* 88 no.1 (Jan. 2000) 53.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Joshua Gamson, "The Culture Wars," *Criticism, The American Prospect*, 14 February 2000, 44.
- ³³ "Public, lured by hype, flocks to N.Y. art show; exhibition: visitors begin queuing up at Brooklyn Museum 3 hours before opening. Protesters also turn out," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 October 1999, A15.
- ³⁴ "Scant Opposition to 'Offensive' Art found by UCLA Researcher," *Ascribe Newswire*, 9 July 2001.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Matthew Kieran, "Relative Views in Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 28, no.1 (Spring 1994): 96.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

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- ³⁸ Ibid, 95-96.
- ³⁹ Ibid, 98-99.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid, 98-99.
- ⁴¹ Greene, 103.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Bonami, 113.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, 114.
- ⁴⁵ Kurt Varnedoe, "Entering the Software Century," *Art News* 91 (September 1992): 57.
- ⁴⁶ Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 121.
- ⁴⁷ Carol Becker, "The Social Responsibility of Artists," *Culture and Democracy*, ed. Andrew Buchwalter (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1992), 246.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 242.
- ⁴⁹ M.J.Parsons, "Cognition as Interpretation in Art Education," *The Arts, Education, and Aesthetic Knowing: Ninety First Yearbook of the National society for the Study of Education, Part II*, eds. B Reimer & R.A. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 79.
- ⁵⁰ Becker, 246.
- ⁵¹ Anthony Tommasini, "Music: The Devil Made him Do It," *The New York Times*, 30 September 2001, S2p.28.
- ⁵² Richard Serra, "Aestheticizing Terror," *The New York Times*, 21 October 2001, S2p.2.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Sartre (1949) quoted in Greene, "Illuminations and Epiphanies," in *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995), 121.

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