

Art and the ethical today

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What is art's function today, in the early 21st century? It is argued here that, while art's function has changed dramatically throughout history, its formal features are usually regarded as being paramount in ascertaining whether something is art or not. It is further argued, with reference to specific works by contemporary artists (Serrano, Mapplethorpe and Reggio), that it is impossible, and inadvisable, to reduce the importance of art to its formal-aesthetic properties, as some people tend to do. Moreover, while the formal and the conceptual aspects of art are linked, there is reason to promote certain functions, such as the ethical, the critical and ecological, at the cost of reducing others (such as the commercial) in the contemporary world.

Key words: Art, formal, conceptual meaning, ethical.

Wat is die funksie van kuns vandag, in die vroeë 21ste eeu? Daar word hier geargumenteer dat, hoewel hierdie funksie dramaties verander het deur die geskiedenis, die formele eienskappe van kuns gewoonlik as deurslaggewend beskou word by die bepaling van kuns as kuns. Daar word verder aangevoer, met verwysing na die werk van tydgenootlike kunstenaars (Serrano, Mapplethorpe en Reggio), dat dit onmoontlik is, en bowendien ook nie raadsaam nie, om die belang van kuns tot formeel-estetiese eienskappe te reduceer, soos sommige kritici wel doen. Verder, ofskoon die formele en konseptuele aspekte van kuns met mekaar verband hou, is daar goeie rede om sekere aspekte – soos die etiese, kritiese en ekologiese – te bevorder ten koste van ander (soos die kommersiële) in die kontemporêre wêreld.

Sleutelwoorde: Kuns, formeel, begripmatige betekenis, eties.

Today it goes without saying that nothing concerning art goes without saying, much less without thinking. Everything about art has become problematic: its inner life, its relation to society, even its right to exist. (Adorno.)

What is art's function today, in the early 21st century? It is well-known that, historically, its role has shifted from a ritualistic function in primitive communities, through a religious role in medieval Western society and its predominantly aestheticist, modernist status in modern culture, to the increasingly varied functions it has in postmodern society (commercial, decorative, aesthetic, political, critical, ecological). Perhaps one should refer to 'functions' instead, given the wide variety of social and cultural contexts in which one encounters art in some or other form or shape, sometimes not even being sure whether what one is confronting in the guise of 'art' – that is, backed up with the claim that it *is* art – is what it claims to be. Every spectator unavoidably approaches art with a certain set of preconceptions concerning its appearance, and when these are disappointed by an artifact or 'artwork', which departs too radically from these prejudgments, it is easily rejected or condemned. A work such as *Piss Christ*, a large Cibachrome photograph of a crucifix floating in 'deep golden' fluid (the artist's urine), by Andres Serrano (Freeland 2001: 7-8; 16-29; colour plate I), for example, jars the religious sensibilities of many potential spectators so severely that many of them refuse even to look at it (Freeland 2001:17-18) because of the title. Another contemporary artist who has provoked this kind of reaction is Robert Mapplethorpe (Freeland 2001: 7; 16-17), whose 'Jim and Tom, Sausalito', showing a man urinating into another's mouth, may seem to most people to stretch the idea of 'art' beyond any recognizability, as other photographic works by him do too.

This is not the only guise in which one encounters art today, of course; in fact, it is not even nearly the overwhelmingly dominant shape of 'art' in the broad sense of the term. For that, one only has to switch on the television set, or open a newspaper or glossy magazine, and take in the glut of advertising 'art', or the 'artwork' packaging a vast array of products and

brands (such as the innovative, but kitsch ‘artistic’ presentation of ABSOLUT Vodka), with the obvious aim of persuading viewers and readers to spend their hard-earned cash on the latter. This is undoubtedly the pervasive function of (part of what counts as popular) ‘art’ today – that of promoting the interests of companies producing the endless stream of consumer products that bombard one’s senses from every corner (Herbst 2005).¹ The other kind of popular art which is familiar to most people today is popular cinema, of course – not called ‘mainstream’ cinema for nothing. It is mainstream in so far as it appeals to the ‘mainstream’ of society, and in turn reproduces it by providing desirable characters, actions and settings as sites of identification on the part of audiences (Olivier 2006), sometimes unapologetically and explicitly establishing an intra-cinematic visual link between such characters and commodities like cars, watches, designer clothes and toiletries by means of so-called ‘product placement’. And this function of (popular) art is a far cry from the shock tactics and disorienting effects accompanying the work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano (among others), referred to above. If commercial art does employ shock tactics of any recognizable kind, it is usually not of such an uncompromising kind – art has always been ‘dislocating’ or ‘alienating’ (as Brecht would say) in its effects on viewers in so far as novel ways have always been employed to attract attention and convey some idea regarded as being significant to spectators. Commercial, capitalism-serving art is no different from *avant garde* art in this respect (at least in its immediate intention²), but it usually succeeds in stopping short of being offensive, for an obvious reason, namely the profit motive – the risk of being offensive or too uncompromisingly challenging, which few instances of commercial art take, is just too inimical to the ultimate, unnegotiable principle of capital, namely the imperative to generate profit. Even so, one frequently picks up media references to viewers’ (or listeners’, or readers’) complaints about certain advertisements which are regarded as being gender- or race-insensitive in their choice of iconography and/or dialogue, for example, and the responses to such objections usually assume the form of profuse apologies on the part of the companies or manufacturers concerned (lest they relinquish the sought-after profits by alienating their product, brand or trademark from consumers).

It should be apparent from the above that it is unwise to attribute to ‘art’ only one, single function in contemporary society. Any intelligent answer to the question concerning art’s role or function should differentiate among divergent social and cultural contexts within which art’s functions would be correspondingly different. My primary concern here is to inquire into the role of what I would designate as ‘serious art’, however, without denying the multifaceted relation that exists between such art and popular as well as commercial art (a relation that merits an inquiry in its own right). A useful place to start considering serious art is the distinction between art’s formal qualities and what is usually referred to as its ‘content’, both of which are implicated in the question: what does this artwork mean? The reason for this is that the meaning of anything that can be interpreted – an artwork, a natural object like a stone, a sentence uttered by a speaker, a set of footprints or tracks in the snow, the configuration of leaves in a tree, and so on – is articulated on various levels, all of which comprise, in semiotic terms, signifiers of different kinds. These signifiers may be formal (shapes, textures, colours, configurations of intersecting or divergent lines), or they may be ‘material’ in the sense of either subject matter or meaning-‘content’ (what I would prefer to call ‘conceptual meaning’, a phrase which is virtually tautological in so far as all meaning is susceptible to being formulated conceptually, whether it is formal, ‘denotative’ or ‘connotative’). The question, what an artwork ‘represents’, while inseparable from its formal features, is related to the ‘content’ or conceptual side of meaning, that is, to what is referred to semiotically as the signified – which, as poststructuralist thinkers like Lacan have pointed out, in its turn unavoidably again functions as a signifier referring to another signified or ‘conceptual meaning’, and so on, with the result that ‘language’ in its entirety may be described as a chain of signifiers (Olivier 2005). It is precisely at this point – the

question of ‘reference’ – where the function of art today may be comprehended in adversarial terms, that is, in such divergent ways that one may sometimes be tempted to think that different individuals (art critics, politicians, religious ministers, members of the public) are talking about entirely different things when they are ostensibly referring to the ‘same’ artwork.

I shall try to unpack what is at stake here by referring to Serrano’s and Mapplethorpe’s work, mentioned briefly earlier, as well as to the cinematic art of Godfrey Reggio, all of which amply illustrates what I would like to claim regarding the function of art in society today, namely that *even if works of art lend themselves to being perceived and understood in ‘purely’ formal terms, it is not only impossible, given their ineluctable concomitant representational function (intended or not by the artist), but downright irresponsible and ill-advised, to ignore the ‘content’ or ‘conceptual meaning’ (the signified), and concomitantly, the ethical function of artworks.* My claim is underpinned by an important assumption, namely, that the (historical, social, cultural, political and economic) context within which an artwork is produced, partly contributes to its overall meaning, although – because this context is aesthetically transformed in the artworks in question (see Olivier 1987) – its meaning cannot be reduced to these parameters, as has so often been demonstrated by the continued relevance of (for example) Sophocles’s, Euripides’s and Shakespeare’s tragedies, Picasso’s *Guernica*, Cézanne’s paintings, Gothic cathedrals and virtually every significant artwork ever produced. Despite their local, specific conditions of provenance, they have proved their status as ‘serious art’ by their surprising and enigmatic quality of surpassing the local conditions of their production and establishing certain ‘universally human’ insights (if not ‘truths’) For example, although Picasso’s *Guernica* has the eponymous Spanish town, bombed by the fascists during the Spanish Civil War of the early 20th century as its historical referent, its graphic, disturbing images of pain and suffering have a multitude of heuristic and hermeneutic applications, not restricted to conditions of war, while Cézanne’s paintings of Mount St Victoire provide the graphic and chromatic, visual template, as it were, for comprehending the heavy, yet beautiful materiality of mountains everywhere, even if, *via* their colours, one is made aware of the differences in specific colour-qualities of mountains from one region to the next. The fact that formalists would probably cry foul when they read this statement is an index of the point at which opinions diverge, namely the question of ‘reference’ – for inveterate formalists like Clive Bell (1965: 55-56) it would be blasphemy to interpret Cézanne’s paintings as ‘representing’ a mountain from various angles, at different times of the day, and so forth. Artworks should, according to them, be ‘read’ only in terms of formal qualities like lines, angles, colours and so on – what Bell calls ‘significant form’; to consider artworks in representational terms would be to ignore them as art.

I do not deny the significance of such formal features, but I believe it is an impoverishment of an artwork’s meaning to restrict it to these. The work of Serrano, Mapplethorpe and Godfrey Reggio serves very well to explain why this is the case, and simultaneously illustrates why it is now, more than ever before, imperative not to ignore the content or conceptual meaning of such art. In Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi* (‘Life out of balance’; 1983 – the first of his *Qatsi*-trilogy) viewers are greeted with a succession of what are probably some of the most spectacular natural scene-sequences ever filmed, to the accompaniment of a musical score by Philip Glass. This continues for just less than halfway through the film, when, contrasting starkly with the cinematographic presentation of the rhythms and flows pervading natural scenery, viewers are suddenly confronted with equally striking visual sequences of a wide variety of industrial and technological operations, of urban environments and cityscapes, many of them showing the perpetually restless motion, day and night, of motor cars and other machines, as well as of masses of human beings ceaselessly mingling, walking and commuting in cities (Olivier 2005a³). In what I have said so far I have deliberately avoided any attempt to suppress the representational aspect of the image-sequences in *Koyaanisqatsi*, for the fairly obvious reason

that, to anyone minimally familiar with the conventions of photography and cinematography, certain images are easily recognizable as images of mountains, rivers, waves and other natural settings, while others represent machines of various kinds, cityscapes, cars, people and so on. However, when one makes the effort to suspend these representational meanings of the image-configurations in question – which is not that easy, and takes a deliberate and sustained effort – it is possible to view these images in a relatively ‘formal’ manner, with the result that something quite surprising emerges – something that seems to have been intended by the director of the film, Godfrey Reggio, judging by the juxtaposition of certain images which draw one’s attention to formal similarities between those images that have very different conceptual valences. A case in point is the shot of a nuclear device exploding in the distance, framed by a desert landscape, its familiar mushrooming cloud slowly, inexorably billowing up – technology at its most powerfully destructive level. Foregrounded in the same shot one notices a cactus, however, the shape of which, although not as symmetrical as the nuclear mushroom cloud, bears a strong formal resemblance to the latter. Here, in one shot, Reggio’s film teaches one a lesson about formalism: formally, there is no fundamental difference between what I have described as a ‘mushroom cloud’ and the shape of a cactus in the foreground, *and yet* – at the level of representation, or what these two juxtaposed images *signify* conceptually – no one can escape the implication that, to reduce them to formal sameness in the name of art, would be false and misleading in an important sense: the shape signifying ‘cactus’ represents a living thing, and metonymically, life as such, while that signifying ‘nuclear explosion’ represents a force that is (at least in that specific manifestation) inimical to life on earth. Conceptually, in terms of ‘content’, they could not be more antithetical.

The same may be said of the natural scenery and the urban scenery collectively, from a cinematographic point of view – formally speaking, there is no distinction between them as far as beauty is concerned; but what they signify, is a different kettle of fish altogether. Hence the sense of Reggio’s choice of title for his first of a trilogy of films, namely, in the Hopi language, *Koyaanisqatsi* – which means, significantly, ‘Life out of balance’. The fact that the film does not contain any dialogue or voice-over narration, but consists entirely of image-sequences accompanied by Glass’s haunting musical score, makes it all the more powerful as far as its impact is concerned, and I would argue that this impact derives from a combination of the (formal) isomorphism between the ‘natural’ scenery and the urban-technological-social scenery, on the one hand, and the conceptual divergence of these at the level of content. It is left up to the viewer to put two and two together, with the realization that what is similar at one level, is entirely, lethally, different at another. In light of this consideration, could anyone still argue in favour of an unremitting formalism in art?

With Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographic work in mind (alluded to at the outset in this article; Freeland 2001: 7; 16-17)⁴, this becomes even more apparent. Mapplethorpe won posthumous notoriety with the staging of, and subsequent ‘obscenity’-trial surrounding, an exhibition of his ‘sexually explicit’ and ‘homosexual’ photographs at the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center in 1990, after the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., had yielded to pressure from conservatives by cancelling his show, titled ‘The perfect moment’. The kind of photographs that comprised this exhibition covered a wide spectrum of subject matter. Deborah Levinson (1989: 2), in her review of ‘The perfect moment’ describes it as follows:

The exhibit is a retrospective of a brilliant photographer’s work, ranging from his famous Lisa Lyons series and portraits of New York celebrities, to his starkly sexual flowers and images of the gay community. It’s a fairly even sampling of his oeuvre – although it does rely a little heavily on Mapplethorpe’s favorite floral subject, the calla lily – and is accompanied by a 55-minute videotape of a BBC interview with the photographer. 0

Some of these photographs were used as basis for the obscenity charges against the Contemporary Arts Center and its Curator in Cincinnati. Two of these photographs which particularly outraged Republican senator Jesse Helms at the time (so much so that he used them, as well as Serrano's *Piss Christ*, referred to earlier, as evidence supporting his attempt to sink the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States, which had funded the exhibition) are described by Levinson (1989: 1) in this way:

These include 'Man in Polyester Suit', depicting the polyester-clad torso of a black man, his uncircumcised penis dangling from his fly, and 'Rosie', a two- or three-year-old child caught, shocked, on film – her crotch exposed. Helms claims the latter is a clear example of child pornography. Both photographs are part of *The Perfect Moment* collection.

Far from being anything pornographic,⁵ however, both of these photographs, with their graphic emphasis on limbs, strike the viewer as being visually consonant with the flower photographs in the same show. 'Man in Polyester Suit' or, for that matter, 'Ken and Tyler', is a good example of the formal resemblance between Mapplethorpe's human subjects and his flowers. Whether it is the image of a strangely plant- or fruit-like, pendant male sex organ framed by a smartly dressed masculine shape, or that of two perfectly symmetrically poised male human bodies – one black, one white – or images of his erotically suggestive flowers, it is almost impossible to ignore either their iconic isomorphism or their eroticism. Evidently Levinson agrees (1989: 2-3):

...in 'Ken and Tyler' two headless figures, one black and one white, pose with their left legs poised like ballet dancers. The photograph is at once precise and erotic, a combination only Mapplethorpe or Weston [from whose work his own style is said to be derived] would have been able to achieve. Mapplethorpe's flowers are as carefully positioned as his human subjects. His still lifes are stark – usually only one or two flowers, and often in shadow – but they display a raw sexuality even more powerful than the nudes. His treatment of the male and female aspects of the calla lily is most striking, one photograph emphasizing the flower's phallic stamen, another emphasizing its feminine curves. At the size at which the flower photographs have been printed, their sensuality becomes overwhelming. The colors – yellow-orange lilies against a royal purple background, green pipe-cleaner stems and red silk petals of a poppy and bud – are so vibrant that they draw the viewer in, forcing him [*sic*] to acknowledge their primitive sexuality.

From Levinson's description and comments it should be apparent why a formalist interpretation of Mapplethorpe's artistic work would be inadequate, reductive and shortsighted: it is precisely the formal similarities between his photographs that comprise the basis for their eroticism. And their irresistible eroticism, while emanating from the formal features of his images, simultaneously signals their transgression of the parameters of formalism. After all, even if it is his formal treatment of his subject matter that makes them erotic, an erotic charge is not self-referential; it connects semiotically with a viewing subject and a world outside the formal-aesthetic frame.

To elaborate: what is usually called the representational aspect of art obtrudes itself irresistibly when confronted by Mapplethorpe's photographs – what I would prefer to call its conceptual ('content') aspect, in so far as the signification of the images, while being partly formal in terms of shape and graphic configuration, is also, ineluctably, tied to the signifieds of worldly phenomena such as bodies, clothes, plants and the like. Levinson's description, above, of human bodies and of flowers are undeniably not restricted to formal properties – even the flowers' attributes are interpreted in terms of their resemblance to human limbs and bodies. This is extremely significant, because – and this is the crux of my argument concerning art today – it demonstrates that one can no longer (nor could one ever, strictly speaking) hide behind formalist arguments to justify art against its conservative detractors like Senator Jesse Helms. To be sure – as I have acknowledged above – it is the formal impact of both the cinematographic images in Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* and the photographic images in Mapplethorpe's work which

makes them visually compelling, but to *restrict* their significance to this, as ‘art experts’ who testified at the obscenity trial of the gallery in Cincinnati where the latter’s work was shown, did (Freeland 2001: 17), is to overlook what one may refer to broadly as their *ethical* significance. *The paradox of significant art is the fact that, unless it is recognized as art through some observable formal property or set of such properties, it fails to have an ethical (political, social, critical) impact.* I am using ‘ethical’ here in the same sense as Karsten Harries (1997) where he writes of the ethical function of architecture, and in the sense that Shylock’s well-known speech on the humanity of Jews in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (Act III, scene 1; 1993: 220-221) may be termed ethical. It may be further elaborated in light of Kant’s famous remark in *The critique of judgment* (1952: 223; see also 221-224 and 79-80), that ‘the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good’. What does this mean?

First, it may seem incongruous that I cite Kant, whose thought is usually taken as being the source of formalism in modern aesthetics (Freeland 2001: 8-16), to argue that art’s significance surpasses the pleasure derived from the ‘purposiveness without a purpose’ characteristic of the ‘disinterested’ experience of art through aesthetic judgement (Kant 1952: 41-44). According to Kant, the aesthetic pleasure in question accompanies judgments pertaining to beauty, which he explains (Kant 1952: 57-59) as deriving from a state of ‘harmony’ or equilibrium between the judging subject’s rational faculties of imagination and understanding in ‘free play’ (in contrast to the conflict or dissonance between these faculties, that accompanies the judgment of the sublime). But when he claims that beauty is the ‘symbol of the morally good’, in other words, that it is in a certain (not necessarily metaphysical) sense the sensible appearance of the ‘supersensible’ (what is morally good), he shows that he is acutely aware of the untenability of a conception of art that would *restrict* it to the merely formal sphere of beauty, the aesthetic importance of the latter notwithstanding. In short, by arguing that beauty symbolizes the morally good, Kant establishes, at the very least, an analogical relationship between the sphere of the aesthetic and that of the ethical (Kant 1952: 222), which is another way of saying that art has ethical significance (see Olivier 2001 & 2002).⁶

What Harries (1997: 4) refers to as ‘the ethical function of architecture’ also applies to the kind of art under consideration here. This does not mean that Harries would deny the aesthetic appeal of works of architecture, or indeed of many of the elements in a building (such as its materials, the formal aspects of its design, and so on). He does, however, claim that architecture differs from the other arts insofar as its inescapable practical function – its inhabitability – imparts to it a distinctive ethical role, namely to provide a sense of ‘place’ or an ethical orientation in the world. This ‘ethical’ function is related to the word ‘ethos’. When attributed to architecture, it signifies a capacity to impart to the people who inhabit buildings such a sense of ‘place’, which is unavoidably connected to an ethical practice, that is, the kinds of things one does in that specific architectural environment. When one ‘feels at home’ in a specific building, for instance, or when an interior space allows one to use it well for its assigned purpose (whether it is to perform specific tasks, or to sleep, to study, or play-act), one may say that it satisfies the ethical requirement to transform impersonal ‘space’ into human ‘place’ (Olivier 2005b). What I would like to argue here, is that, even granting Harries his claim that architecture differs from the other arts by being spatially inhabitable, and hence establishing spatial parameters or orientational markers that induce a sense of ‘place’ in the people who move through these architecturally modulated spaces, one cannot ignore the corresponding ethical function encountered in the other arts (painting, sculpture, cinema, literature, music) – an ethical function which, crucially, depends upon the formal-aesthetic characteristics of the works in question. Rodin’s well-known *Burghers of Calais* would not induce in viewers a sense of sympathy, even empathy, with the plight of the figures represented there as suffering beings, were it not for the formal-sculptural qualities of the figures, and not only when the historical incident on which the piece is based,

is known to the viewer. This is an important point to grasp, because unless it were granted, a 'group of figures' with very different formal sculptural qualities – say, qualities not associable with any distinctive attitude at all – could conceivably have the same claim to being art in this context; in fact, qualitatively speaking the sculpture may be so bland that it may be difficult to perceive it as a 'group' of any sort. And when a very differently conceived 'group'-sculpture – evincing a triumphant attitude instead, for example – is linked interpretively with the historical event in question, it may strike the viewer as being incongruous, given the implicit claim that such a sculpture articulates something dramatically and recognizably ethical about the event in question.

Similarly, although it may not seem to be the case at first sight, Reggio's cinematic work in the *Qatsi*-trilogy, the controversial photographs of Mapplethorpe, as well as Serrano's *Piss Christ* and his other so-called *Piss Deities* (Freeland 2001: 21), fulfill an ethical function, just as those paintings by Goya which depict some of the atrocities that occurred after Napoleon's invasion of Spain in the early 19th century, cannot be divorced from powerful ethical and political statements (Freeland 2001: 21-27). In Freeland's (p.24) words: 'Goya makes it plain that there were no moral winners in this war...'. And although his series of paintings, *The horrors of war* (1810-1814), has the French-Spanish war as its specific context of provenance, the degree to which it affects viewers with its disturbing images (disturbing because of their specific formal qualities), lifts it to the level of a universal condemnation of war. Arguably, it would not be difficult for most people to agree on this, but is the same agreement probable – even possible – where Serrano and Mapplethorpe are concerned? Certainly not, judging by Senator Jesse Helms's comment on Serrano's work (Freeland 2001: 8): 'I do not know Mr Andres Serrano, and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an artist, he is a jerk'. If this is the case, in what sense could it, as well as Mapplethorpe's and Reggio's artworks, be regarded as evincing ethical import of some kind?

It is no accident that Goya, whom I have referred to by way of comparison, is discussed at length by Freeland (2001: 21-27) as a precursor to Serrano, in an effort to make the latter's *Piss Christ* intelligible as an artwork in the same sense as Goya's works, whose political and ethical import could hardly be doubted, whether or not the viewer agrees with the stance that they project. Summarizing art critic Lucy Lippard's defence of Serrano's work, Freeland (2001: 17-21) shows that it assumed a three-level form. First Lippard analyzed its formal and material attributes, second, its content or meaning, and third, its context in the Western tradition of art. Regarding the first of these, Lippard states (quoted in Freeland 2001: 19):

Piss Christ – the object of censorial furor – is a darkly beautiful photographic image. The small wood-and-plastic crucifix becomes virtually monumental as it floats, photographically enlarged, in a deep golden, rosy glow that is both ominous and glorious. The bubbles wafting across the surface suggest a nebula. Yet the work's title, which is crucial to the enterprise, transforms this easily digestible cultural icon into a sign of rebellion or an object of disgust simply by changing the context in which it is seen.

In this short excerpt Lippard touches on all three the levels referred to above. She talks about its shape and colour, its material qualities and its context, all of which connect and add to the overall meaning of the piece. Surprisingly, though, she fails to mention what strikes me as being most obvious in regard to its conceptual meaning: although Freeland (2001: 20) reports her as pointing out that Serrano comes from a cultural and religious background where body fluids are not viewed with repulsion, but are instead regarded as sources of strength (hence the many vials containing saints' relics such as blood and bones in Catholic churches), urine is associated with waste or excrement, and Serrano's title seems to me to establish a clear signifying thread pointing to Christ as a symbol being 'expelled' from the church as an institution. (Admittedly, she does suggest that Serrano wants to condemn the 'lip service' paid to a religion while spurning

its values, but she does not link this directly with the ‘excremental’ meaning of the urine as signified.) Clearly, this constitutes a critical ethical position regarding conventional attitudes, and – as remarked earlier concerning other artworks – again it is intimately connected with the formal qualities of the work. In fact, the impact of *Piss Christ* derives from the tension between its appearance as a big, (five by three feet), beautiful photograph with a predictably offensive title. From all the descriptions of it that I have read (I have only seen smallish colour reproductions of it), it is apparent that it is strikingly beautiful in an ambivalent way, simultaneously signifying something sacred and enigmatic through the mysterious glow in which it is bathed, and the tension between its visual impact and the meaning of its title causes it to be suspended between a work that holds the viewer’s attention, fascinates her or him, even, and one that jars one’s sensibilities. This is precisely the kind of dislocating or alienating effect that makes something recognizable as art, and that is a condition of its ethical or political function. After all – if no one had noticed *Piss Christ*’s formal properties, it could not have become as controversial as it has become, and its ethical significance would have been overlooked.

Both Mapplethorpe’s and Reggio’s work satisfies this condition, too, of having formal properties that are striking to the point of being ‘dislocating’, and at the same time adopting an unmistakable ethical stance at the level of conceptual meaning. In Mapplethorpe’s case, the fact that there is a demonstrable isomorphism or formal similarity between his photographs, regardless of particular subject matter or conceptual meaning, has prompted art critics (for instance, those who gave evidence at the obscenity trial in Cincinnati) to defend his work precisely on those grounds as being art, and not obscene photographs. While it is easy to agree that such an isomorphism is demonstrably there, most people who are subject to the conventional belief, that art should concern itself only with what is beautiful, pleasing, or entertaining, understandably find it disconcerting to see photographs like ‘Man in Polyester Suit’, ‘Jim and Tom, Sausalito’, or ‘Ken and Tyler’, with their homoerotic overtones at a conceptual level, juxtaposed with photographs of flowers (the erotic resonances of which would probably be denied by people like Senator Helms). Hence it is all the more regrettable that such art critics have not been willing, or able, to surpass the argumentative sphere of the aesthetic, and insist – as I have argued above – on the indissoluble link, known since the ancient Greeks (as affirmed in the work of Euripides, Sophocles, Plato and Aristotle⁷), and recognized by modern figures such as Kant and Hegel (Olivier 1983), as well as contemporary thinkers like Harries, between the aesthetic and the ethical.

If this had been done more consistently, it would perhaps be more apparent to the general public that the ‘homoerotic’ photographs of Mapplethorpe, quite apart from their undeniable aesthetic value, may *also* be regarded, at the conceptual level, as powerful statements to the effect that gay or homosexual people ‘fit in’ with the rest of the world as represented by ‘The perfect moment’-exhibition. If one reads the exhibition in metaphorical terms this is apparent, too: formally, these photographs are consonant with those on the exhibition which do not have homoerotic themes; hence, metaphorically speaking, what they ‘represent’ in homoerotic terms at a conceptual niveau, is ‘perfectly’ consonant with the rest of the world as it is understood conceptually. Seen in this light, it is evident that Mapplethorpe’s work is normative in its implications, in so far as it exhorts society powerfully, on ethical grounds, to recognize the right of homosexual people to co-exist, or ‘blend in’, as the photographs do, with their (social) surroundings. To this extent the ethical import of his photographs cannot be divorced from their political implications concerning the rights of gay people, either. I should emphasize, once again, however, that neither the ethical nor the political dimension of his work can be separated from its formal attributes.

What about Reggio's cinematic art? It will be remembered that *Koyaanisqatsi* – a film consisting entirely of image-sequences and music, with no dialogue, contrasts natural scenery with technological, industrial and urban scenery, with a noticeable formal consonance – as in the case of Mapplethorpe's photographs – between those representing nature in all her variety and those pertaining to the social and technological world constructed by human beings. Again, this isomorphism cannot disguise the divergence of meaning at a conceptual level, as pointed out earlier, and it is precisely here that the ethical significance of Reggio's film is located. Because the viewer is irresistibly confronted by the conceptual divergence of the natural sequences, connoting life, and the sequences representing human transformation of nature into an industrial and technological landscape which – in some respects, and perhaps even predominantly – appear to indicate a hostility to life, one cannot escape the imperative that confronts one here, namely, to judge for oneself whether human technological activity is life-promoting or life-destructive. And if the latter (which seems to be the case, judging by the visual evidence of the film), should one not adopt an ethical stance on the matter? One cannot avoid the conclusion, here, that Reggio's film-art is deeply, uncompromisingly ethical as ecologically sensitive cinema.

To be sure, it is easy to ignore this imperative in the name of film as entertainment, but this does not lessen the ethical responsibility of each and every viewer. Not only other life-forms depend on the integrity of nature; humans do too, and we may indeed be ignoring the systematic destruction of the natural world at our, and the rest of the planet's, peril.⁸ I am convinced that, at the present time, it is one of the most important tasks facing artists worldwide to create an awareness of the derelict state of nature (as a result of human technological activity), and to do it in such a manner that – as Reggio's cinematic art⁹ demonstrates – it confronts viewers uncompromisingly with their ethical responsibility concerning the well-being of the planet which is the home of all living creatures on it. When I remarked earlier that it is today, more than ever before, imperative to realize, and accept, that art's function is not exhausted by the aesthetic, I had this in mind, as well as what I have argued in connection with Mapplethorpe and Serrano's (and by implication all) art, which demonstrably fulfills an ethical and political function.

But what about art that does not have any obvious or apparent representational aspect to it – that is, abstract art? My argument so far has focused on art which, despite lending itself to interpretation in representational terms (as far as subject matter goes), can also be viewed in 'purely' formal terms, temporarily ignoring its conceptual axis of meaning. But what about art where this representational aspect of meaning is not available, except in fanciful terms, where one imagines seeing in abstract shapes something like cloud formations or floral contours? Doesn't it follow from my argument that, for any art to have the kind of ethical function I am proposing here, it simply has to have a representational aspect to it, regardless of its formal qualities, lest it be impossible (or at least very difficult) to connect it with the social or natural world? The answer to these questions, I believe, is that even abstract art – abstract expressionism, cubism, constructivism, suprematism, for instance – is distinguishable by its ethical function, provided, as in the case of art with a representational aspect, its formal qualities mark it as art in the first place. How is this possible?

In *The meaning of modern art* (1968) Karsten Harries addresses the difficult question of modern art in all its varieties, including those mentioned above. Working on the principle that all art may be understood as embodying an 'ideal image' of humanity, he points out (1968: 61-67) that the abstraction encountered in abstract expressionism (Kandinsky's work, for example), may be read as a rejection of the (social and natural) world ('abstraction' does mean a 'thinking away', after all), and a retreat into a world of the spirit, where the vagaries of an unpredictable and dangerous world do not threaten the observer. If one considers the historical

provenance of modern abstract art around the First World War, it is not difficult to grasp abstract art as such a rejection of the extant world – in fact, given Harries’s interpretation of Malevich’s suprematism (1968: 67-69) as embodying the limit of freedom (of interpretation) in the ‘white square’, it makes sense that, even in its utter abstraction – that is, the apparent absence of all references to the world – it represents an ethical stance concerning the moral, social and political unacceptability of this world.

Another historical observation should be added here, lest the impression be created that any contemporary replication or imitation of Kandinsky’s or Malevich’s work, among others, would automatically qualify as (comparably ‘great’) art. Every work of art, in a certain sense, ‘contributes’ to the context within which it is understood by means of its formal features and the question whether it lends itself to being interpreted representationally. Although it is doubtful whether we understand ancient Greek painting or relief sculptures in identical terms as the ancient Greeks themselves did, given the fact that their world-understanding, which framed these artworks, was so different from ours, we do not have any fundamental difficulty ‘understanding’ them from our historical perspective, in light of our ability to reconstruct their world-understanding to a certain degree – partly with the help of these works themselves, and further because of the historical distance separating the present era from the ancient one. Far from preventing understanding, this distance makes understanding possible, even when it is (unavoidably) characterized by historical ‘prejudice’: instead of being avoidable, as British empiricists such as John Locke would have us believe with the doctrine of the mind as a *tabula rasa* or clean slate, prejudice (or pre-judgment) is the condition of understanding, even if it is modified in the process of appropriating something like a work of art interpretively (Gadamer 1982: 241-253). In other words, every artwork partly reflects, and partly transcends the historical era in which it was made. For this reason artworks have a history – what Gadamer (1982: 267-269) calls their ‘effective history’ – and their ‘own’ historical context of emergence contributes, in the first place, to their meaning, as does the history of their reception or interpretation.

For this reason no artwork can be considered ‘complete’, or as a unit of meaning, in isolation from its historical context of creation or subsequent interpretation. That is also why it is bound to strike one as incongruous if someone were to claim to have ‘invented’ perspective painting today, or to paint in exactly the cubist mode that Picasso and Braque did and demand to be taken seriously. (Parodies of already existing styles are a different matter, of course.) It further explains why art ineluctably has to strain against its ‘definition’ at any given time, and why novelty is prized so highly in art (see Tilghman 1984: 71-72). Duchamp’s ‘Fountain’ would have been incontrovertibly ludicrous if it had been shown two centuries earlier, before the industrial production of such objects, but at the time it was first exhibited – a urinal disconcertingly out of its ‘normal’ context (Harries 1968: 141) – its parodic or satirical intentions were clear enough to at least some observers to be seen as art with a powerful critical punch. Hence, in addition to strikingly ‘dislocating’ formal features and a discernible ethical function, art also has to be of its time (instead of being an empty imitation of art which fulfilled this function at an earlier time), that is, it has to lend itself to interpretation as a genuine response to or stance on something – such as contested gay rights, or the ecological crisis – which is part and parcel of the social world at that particular historical juncture. The paradox of art is that, even when it has its provenance in specific historical, political or social circumstances, it announces itself as significant art by its capacity to transcend these, and to be seen as having this (ethical or political) significance long after its first emergence. I have no doubt that the work by the three artists considered here – Serrano, Mapplethorpe and Reggio – will prove no exception to this rule.

Notes

- 1 Herbst's chapter supplies the reader with ample evidence of the ways that advertising employs to elicit the desire for certain products on the part of consumers. What should be rejected, however, is his implicit endorsement, if not promotion, of the values of capitalism. For a critique of the latter, see Olivier 2005c & 2006.
- 2 Although this should be apparent, it has to be made explicit that 'serious' art is recognizable by its 'dislocating' effect on viewers or audiences in a sense additional to that of the immediate (and ephemeral) captivation of viewers' attention, namely its capacity to induce a nagging sense of intellectual and/or conscientious restlessness and reflectiveness. Succinctly stated: serious art changes the way people think and act. See in this regard Olivier 1987 & 1998.
- 3 Here an analysis and interpretation of Reggio's *Qatsi*-trilogy, through the lens of Deleuze's concept of the cinematic 'time image', are provided.
- 4 See also the film by Frank Pierson (2000), based on the notorious Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center 'obscenity trial' surrounding an exhibition of Mapplethorpe's work. The film reconstructs all the events leading up to and following the opening of the exhibition, 'The perfect moment', and features the photographs themselves, with the result that viewers get a good idea of what was at stake from all sides in the debate concerning the question, whether Mapplethorpe's photographs transgressed the admissible limits of freedom of expression.
- 5 Just how inappropriate it is to label Mapplethorpe's work 'pornographic' becomes apparent in light of the meaning of the word, namely 'the depiction of (someone as) a whore', which, in a patriarchal context, has always assumed the form of the subordination of women, that is, their representation in (usually sexually) subjugated roles. This does not rule out the possibility of a homosexual counterpart of pornography, but Mapplethorpe's pictures evade this charge because of the evident absence of such subjugation. Hence, it seems to me more appropriate to describe them as 'erotic art'.
- 6 The issue of the significance of art, especially in the thought of as complex a thinker as Kant, cannot be adequately dealt with here, hence the reference to these publications, where I have addressed the question at greater length. In the article on *Weir's Dead Poets Society* (Olivier 2002), in particular, I use Kant's thought on the aesthetic to show that its complex array of concepts enables one to come to terms with the ethical significance of Weir's film in such a way that imagination is redeemed from what is sometimes regarded as its irrational status, and, with the help of Kant, restored to its proper place within the overall structure of reason. One of the things focussed on there, which is also of importance in the present article, concerns what Kant calls 'aesthetic ideas' – ideas the significance of which is inexhaustible, and clearly involves ethical and political considerations, over and above those of beauty and aesthetic pleasure.
- 7 In the great Greek tragedians' work – Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, for example – the ethical relevance of art is demonstrated beyond dispute, for instance in Antigone's refusal, on ethical grounds, to submit to her uncle, Creon's prohibition on the burial of her brother. Both Plato and Aristotle confirm the ethical-political relevance of art in their work – in Plato's case negatively in so far as he proposes to ban artists from his ideal 'Republic' (given their ability to affect the populace politically through their work), and in Aristotle's case affirmatively in his *Poetics* where he attributes to art (specifically tragedy) the capacity to move the audience, through 'pity and fear', in the face of the moral sufferings of the tragic heroine or hero (for example Oedipus discovering his unwitting, incestuous relationship with his mother, Jocasta). I should add that my argument concerning the ethical function of art, while indebted to Harries's claims regarding the ethical function of architecture, is perfectly compatible with what I have argued before concerning the 'transformational' aspect of art as its distinctive characteristic (Olivier 1987).
- 8 On a previous occasion I addressed the question of human – especially capitalism-engendered – activities in relation to nature at length. See Olivier 2005c.
- 9 Although I have not here discussed the other two films in Reggio's *Qatsi*-trilogy, namely *Powaqqatsi* ('Life in transformation'; 1988) and *Naqoyqatsi* ('Life as war'; 2002), here, they are susceptible to an interpretation along the same lines as that of *Koyaanisqatsi* given here, although the effect of technology on society is related to different things in each film. All three feature evocative musical scores by Philip Glass, which contribute in no small measure to the impact of these films. For a more extensive discussion of the other two *Qatsi*-films, see Olivier 2005a.

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