

# TRANSGRESSIVE INTERACTIVE ART

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by

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# Abstract

*Transgressive Interactive Art* is artwork which both violates the boundaries of its audience and functions via their participation. Transgression, interactivity and art are defined and analyzed. Four transgressive, interactive pieces produced by Charles DeTar in the course of his master's studies at Dartmouth College are discussed. Other examples of twentieth century transgressive interactive art are discussed in relation to DeTar's works.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This thesis will consist of a discussion of four works that I have completed in the last year, and an analysis of related existing works. Each of the works can be considered *transgressive* — either the content, the presentation, or both undermine what is normally expected of a work. Each makes unusual demands of the audience, in a way that could be considered aggressive or coercive. Each work is also interactive (without audience participation, the work either doesn't function or lacks meaning).

First, I will discuss what the terms transgression, interaction, and art mean. I will then present the four pieces, discuss works of other artists that share stylistic or functional similarities to my works, and evaluate of how successful I think my works are in fulfilling my intentions with them. The works are *Inhibit*, a performance piece designed to push the boundaries of performer and audience roles; *Still*, an installation piece designed to confront notions of authority by coercing participants into behaving differently; *Community*, an installation piece designed to explore social interaction in a constrained scenario; and *SDD*, a device designed to explore moral dilemmas arising from its existence.



# Chapter 2

## Transgressive Interactive Art

In order to clearly discuss transgressive interactive art, it is important first to understand what is meant by the terms transgression, interaction, and art.

### 2.1 What is Transgression?

Transgression can be defined as any overstepping of boundaries, as normally laid out by polite society, law or convention — this is the way the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines it.<sup>[1]</sup> Transgressive art, then, is art that oversteps boundaries. For example, Andres Serrano’s controversial photograph *Piss Christ*, which depicts a figurine of a crucified Jesus Christ in a vat of the artist’s urine, is widely considered to be transgressive. Serrano’s work generated a storm of controversy and public debate which has scarcely abated since the work’s debut in 1987, all the more because Serrano had received funding for the work from the National Endowment for the Arts. This work is among those most frequently cited by opponents of government funding of artwork. It is seen by its opponents as an indication that many artists have lost perspective, and no longer produce work which the general public appreciates.<sup>[2]</sup>

But what is it about *Piss Christ* that makes it transgressive? The essential character of a transgressive work is that it oversteps boundaries. In the case of *Piss Christ*, the work places what many to be considered sacred (the image of the crucifix) in a context that is not only “secular” and “profane”, but is also fundamentally

disgusting (by evolutionary design, humans are revolted by human excrement[3, p 4]). By juxtaposing the “sacred” and the “revolting” in this way, Serrano was sure to cause offense among those who considered the crucifix to be a sacred symbol. However, among those who do not hold this belief, the juxtaposition would likely be less offensive, even though it might still be uncomfortable, disgusting, or unpleasant. Transgressive art is thus defined in relation to its audience: there must be boundaries in the audience members for the work to overstep. These boundaries differ depending on the audience, but every person will inevitably have some sort of boundary. The transgressed boundaries need not be related to beliefs in the sacred — they may simply be expectations of what a performance will consist, etiquette or conventions for the audience’s own behavior in a performance, or the norms or laws regarding social interaction. The particular boundaries which a transgressive work violates lead to very different types of experience: a work such as *Piss Christ*, which a viewer considers offensive, will result in a markedly different experience from a work which simply annoys the viewer with loud noise, or surprises the viewer with an unexpected performance format.

### 2.1.1 Non-transgressive Art

This definition of transgressive art, of course, raises the question: if transgressive artwork is transgressive only in relation to the boundaries particular audiences have, what work of art would *not* be considered transgressive? Even something as seemingly innocuous as Michelangelo’s David has been considered obscene. In 2005, the commissioners of Bartholemew County, Indiana passed an ordinance forbidding citizens from displaying replicas of the statue within public view because of its obscenity.[4]

Artwork is not important because of its physical characteristics alone. The information content in a painting, a sculpture, a musical composition, or even a live performance is very low in comparison to the *exformation* the work contains — the external meaning to which the work refers. Human perception combines a wealth of accrued experience and knowledge with a relatively small amount of incoming perceptual data to produce a qualitative experience. It is impossible for humans to view

something entirely objectively — that is, without a personal interpretation — precisely because the human brain performs much of the interpretation unconsciously. What humans consciously experience has already been colored by unconscious memories, associations and understanding, and we are not capable of experiencing the world without this interpretation.[5]

An interesting thought experiment is to try to imagine a work of art which is not capable of overstepping any boundaries. First, the artwork must not reference any object, as for any potential object, there is surely someone somewhere who would take offense. Piet Mondrian, a modern painter who called his style “neoplasticist,” seemed to be reaching for this goal of non-reference (though for different reasons). Mondrian lost interest in paintings which referenced “real” objects, and began producing paintings that consisted only of solid lines, rectangles, and primary colors.

The emotion of beauty is always obscured by the appearance of the object.

Therefore the object must be eliminated from the picture.[6]

However, even Mondrian’s simple paintings could overstep boundaries: some saw his paintings as possessing in their austerity an offensive disdain for humanity and emotion.[7] Others saw his paintings as being too simple, and thus not qualifying as art at all — empirical studies have even been made to test whether art experts can distinguish between genuine Mondrian paintings and randomly generated fakes (they can’t).[8] Since Mondrian’s paintings overstepped people’s boundaries, they can be considered transgressive.

In fact, any work of art that occupies or alters physical space is potentially transgressive, as any shape or form or sound that is perceptible could potentially reference something that someone somewhere would find offensive. Likewise, a work incapable of transgression would not be able to communicate anything — there could be no message, no title, and no content. If it can even be said to still exist, such a work must only exist within the consciousness of its creator, and never described or referenced. Even in that case, the creator must remain comfortable with the work, and not feel that it has overstepped his or her own boundaries.

Since this reductive conclusion about what is and isn’t transgression leads to

an erasure of any distinctions, defining the transgressiveness of a work of art as an objective phenomena independent of reference to a particular audience is not useful. However, there are clearly works of art that violate more boundaries in their audiences than others. In addition, some works seem to be more transgressive because of the types of boundaries they violate — a work which resulted in a death would be considered substantially more transgressive than one which simply annoyed the audience. It would be difficult or impossible to define precisely a metric by which the transgressiveness of a work could be characterized, but it is clearly something which admits to degrees. The transgressive character of a work also changes over time — the first uses of musical instruments in Catholic churches transgressively violated church norms<sup>1</sup>, while Catholic Pope John Paul II considered even rock music to be acceptable.[10] Similarly, Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* resulted in riots in Paris at its premier,[11] but is now considered part of the standard repertoire of twentieth century music.

Transgressive art almost always has a mixed reception: some viewers or participants find the work to be offensive and dangerous, while others might appreciate the artwork as exciting or insightful. Just as there is no work of art that is completely non-transgressive (in that it cannot violate any boundaries), there is no work of art that is *ultimately* transgressive. If a work manages to be sufficiently transgressive that it offends a large enough majority, it would likely not be considered artwork, but would be considered dangerous, anti-social or psychotic behavior. The work of serial killers — some of whom have gone to great lengths to create intricate patterns or structures around their murders — might be considered something in this category: “creative” work which has no, or nearly no, appreciative viewers. However, even murderers often enjoy small cult followings of fascinated fans. Karlheinz Stockhausen famously commented on the artistic nature of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the

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<sup>1</sup>The early Catholic church forbade the use of musical instruments.

For almost a thousand years Gregorian chant, without any instrumental or harmonic addition was the only music used in connection with the liturgy. The organ, in its primitive and rude form, was the first, and for a long time the sole, instrument used to accompany the chant. The church has never encouraged and at most only tolerated the use of instruments.[9, p 657–688]

World Trade Center in New York City. Stockhausen said the attacks were

the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos.... Minds achieving something in an act that we couldn't even dream of in music, people rehearsing like mad for 10 years, preparing fanatically for a concert, and then dying, just imagine what happened there. You have people who are that focused on a performance and then 5,000 people are dispatched to the afterlife, in a single moment. I couldn't do that. By comparison, we composers are nothing. Artists, too, sometimes try to go beyond the limits of what is feasible and conceivable, so that we wake up, so that we open ourselves to another world.[12]

Stockhausen was harshly lambasted for these comments; most people found the idea of a classifying of the September 11 attacks as art (transgressive or otherwise) inconceivable. However, Stockhausen's comments do show how variable peoples' senses of art can be.

The works discussed in this paper are all, in this sense, ambiguously transgressive. Some audiences may find that the works don't cross their boundaries, where others would feel violated. The moral tension created by these boundaries thus becomes a major component of each of the works — they can be interpreted as offensive or as merely provocative.

## 2.2 What is Interactive Art?

The 20th century has seen a rise in a category of art which requires more interaction between the audience and the artwork than is typically expected in a performance or art exhibit. This can mean interactions as overt as audience members going onto stage and directly participating in the action of a performance, as well as interactions as mundane as walking on or around a sculpture. A good example of interactive art is a series of works Allan Kaprow produced beginning in 1959, which he called *happenings*. In these works, audience members were the performers who directed the action. Typically, the performances would not take place in a traditional theater,

but rather in rooms that were decorated and arranged to suit the performance. The audience members cum performers were given note cards that provided instructions for their role in the performance; some select participants also received

mysterious plastic envelopes containing bits of paper, photographs, wood, painted fragments and cut-out figures. They were also given a vague idea of what to expect: 'there are three rooms for this work, each different in size and feeling. . . . Some guests will also act.[13, pp 128–130]

While by no means the first interactive artwork, Kaprow's *happenings* were substantially more interactive than the majority of the canon of Western Art. Art arising from the Western European tradition is classically considered to be something that one looks at and passively experiences; here, the participants were essential directors of the action.

### 2.2.1 Non-interactive art

Just as a reductive analysis of transgressive art easily leads to the conclusion that there is no art which is not potentially transgressive, perhaps even more easily, all art can be shown to be interactive. Any experience of a work of art does not rest on the content of the art alone, but requires outside reference and understanding. Thus, an experience of a work of art is never solely the creation of the artist, but always includes the interpretation, understanding, and meaning provided by its audience. The only art which can be said to be entirely non-interactive would be art which, just as the ultimately non-transgressive artwork theorized above, does not exist in any way that can be perceived by an audience.

Still, it is useful to distinguish between a work such as a classical symphonic performance, where the audience's interaction is primarily at the level of listening, and a work such as Daniel Goode and Robert Cooke's *Seat of Sound*, a musical sculpture where the only sound is made by participants manipulating the bells and hammers on the sculpture.[14] The latter requires both interpretation and action on the part of the audience (one might say that it requires "participation"), where the former requires only interpretation. The works discussed in this paper are interactive

in this strong sense — they expect direct participation and physical action on the part of the audience.

## 2.3 What is Art?

The question “What is Art?” is unanswerable in any objective sense, more so than even the questions of what transgression and interaction are. Views on what constitutes art swing from extremes like Stockhausen’s description of terrorist attacks as art, to those who consider only the work of the European “Masters” to be art. Modern art is often attacked by critics who contend that its austerity or audience-unfriendliness (or even downright aggressiveness) makes it less valid as art. In an essay on the subject of “inhuman art” (which references several works discussed in this paper), journalist Karl Zinsmeister writes:

Since the 1960s, the hippest modern art has aspired to exactly what every garden-variety 13-year-old brat aims for: maximum opportunities to shock, flout, insult, and otherwise chuck rocks at polite society. . . . Obviously, there’s nothing illegitimate about art sometimes being shocking. But today it virtually has to be in order to be accepted by the tastemakers now guiding the art establishment. . . . One of the saddest effects of contemporary art’s bullheaded ugliness is that it has made high art, architecture, and music repellent to a significant portion of the population.[7]

Aesthetic philosopher and art historian Arthur Danto claims in his book entitled *After the End of Art* that the progression of art has been one of increasing experimentation:

. . . the master narrative of the history of art — in the West but by the end not in the West alone — is that there is an era of imitation, followed by an era of ideology, followed by our post-historical era in which, with qualification, anything goes. . . . In our narrative, at first only mimesis was art, then several things were art but each tried to extinguish its competitors, and then, finally, it became apparent that there were no

stylistic or philosophical constraints. There is no special way works of art have to be. And that is the present and, I should say, the final moment in the master narrative. It is the end of the story.[15, p. 47]

Danto claims that art is no longer a practice of representation, impression, emotion, or any other particular stylistic constraint or conformance to any particular movement. So, in short, anything can be art.

What, then, is art? It depends entirely on whom you ask. It is thus most useful for the purposes of this paper to define art as that which either the creator or the audience considers to be art. It is in the nature of transgressive art to push boundaries, and consequently there will be edge cases about which a work's status as Art is debatable, just as its status as transgressive or interactive might be.

## 2.4 Why Make Transgressive Art?

Is boundary-pushing art worthwhile? The answer to this question depends on the reasons one has for enjoying or creating art — the “purpose” for art. Karl Zinmeister seems to prefer art to be something which people simply “enjoy” — which he claims is representational art, such as that of the pre-modern era.[7] The artists who produced the works I will describe here, however, tend to have different goals. While there may be many more reasons, I will highlight three important reasons for which an artist might choose to produce transgressive artwork: aesthetics, pedagogy or moral teaching, and experimentation. Transgressive artworks often employ more than one of these reasons, and the division between the different reasons is not absolute; still, the categorization can be useful for understanding the function of some pieces.

### 2.4.1 The Aesthetic of Transgression

Transgression carries a unique aesthetic — it is the aesthetic of offense, discomfort, and unpleasantness. Many artists choose to produce art which is deliberately shocking or offensive, just to be shocking and offensive. The Viennese Action Cinema is perhaps the best example of a group concerned with the aesthetic of transgression. They



produced grotesque and disturbing movies depicting decapitations of live animals, fornication with living and dead animals, and sexual acts involving feces and vomit.[?] The Vienna Action Group believed that it was necessary for humans to release pent up urges and to pursue the aesthetic of destruction to its limits. Otto Mühl's *Material Action Manifesto* describes the goals of the group:

... material action promises the direct pleasures of the table. Material action satiates. Far more important than baking bread is the urge to take dough-beating to the extreme.[16]

The Viennese Actionists believed that the aesthetic of transgression was not only worthwhile on its own, but that humans needed to express themselves through this aesthetic to be whole.

Another example of an artist who sought deliberately to shock and offend was G.G. Allin, a punk rock singer and band leader who performed in a number of different groups from the late '80s until his death by heroin overdose in 1993.[17] Allin was notorious for his live shows, which regularly included assaults on audience members, defecation and subsequent smearing of feces on himself and audience members, bashing himself in the head with the microphone until he bled, shoving objects in his anus, and destruction of the performance venue. That he was continuously naked during these shows is almost not worth mentioning by contrast. Allin professed to be promoting an ethos of pure rock 'n' roll — that he was the only true rock 'n' roller left, the only one who cared about preserving freedom, the only one that just “didn't give a fuck” about the establishment's rules.[18] By performing in this manner for years, Allin developed a strong reputation. His performances ceased to provide any genuine shock or outrage in those who attended his shows. One simply wouldn't go unless one was willing to risk getting beaten, smeared with feces and blood, or otherwise violated in the performance — but enough people were willing to risk this, appreciated the aesthetic, or were interested in the underground culture he cultivated that his performances were well attended.[18] Those attending his shows likely would not feel their boundaries had been crossed when Allin performed his usual antics — rather, they would likely feel transgressed if he *didn't*.

As much as critics like Zinmeister believe that the general public wishes to see art that is representational and inoffensive, there is a segment of the population that finds the very shocking, disturbing, and unpleasant characteristics of some transgressive artwork to be appealing. Purveyors of popular “shock rock” acts like Marilyn Manson know this well — transgression is lucrative.

A more interesting question is whether art which uses transgressive tactics to promote the resulting aesthetic remains transgressive for those audience members who enjoy the aesthetic? A teenager who enjoys the shocking aspects of G.G. Allin may enjoy it as much for its capacity to shock his parents and the feeling of superiority he garners by identifying with the aesthetic as he does for the aesthetic itself. It seems that the audience which is most transgressed by Allin’s performances is those who are not in attendance, and wouldn’t want to be.

## 2.4.2 Politics and Payloads in Transgressive Art

Many artists have specific political agendas or other messages they wish to convey with their artwork. These artists might produce transgressive works as a means to present the message better. Creating controversy is an age-old means for getting public attention, and a transgressive approach might bring an artist’s message to the front lines of many more peoples’ thought than a less offensive approach. Additionally, coercive strategies or propaganda techniques, which can be considered transgressive in that they manipulate peoples’ beliefs against their will, can be effective means at pushing audiences toward a particular view.

The futurist instigator Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, in his manifesto *War, the Only Hygiene*, claimed that a performance is only successful if the audience was moved to boo it. “Applause merely indicated ‘something mediocre, dull, regurgitated or too well digested’. Booing assured the actor that the audience was alive, not simply blinded by ‘intellectual intoxication’.” [13, p 16] To this end, Marinetti suggested that one ought to infuriate the audience — by double booking, coating the seats with glue, or doing whatever came to mind on stage. Consequently, the futurists burned flags, yelled at and insulted audiences, and instigated fights in their performances.[13] Marinetti

also championed a style of theatrical performance he called “variety theater.” In his *Variety Theater Manifesto*, Marinetti argues that theater ought to be:

“the healthiest of all spectacles in its dynamism of form and color (simultaneous movement of jugglers, ballerinas, gymnasts, colorful riding masters, spiral cyclones of dancers spinning off the points of their feet). In its swift, overpowering dance rhythms the Variety Theatre forcibly drags the slowest souls out of their torpor and forces them to run and jump.”[19]

In addition, “variety theatre coerced the audience into collaboration, liberating them from their passive roles as ‘stupid voyeurs’.”[13] The futurists performed many plays that attempted to motivate these ideas, as well as numerous other “evenings” of entertainment intent on pushing audiences’ boundaries, all the while promoting the futurist political agenda of radical nationalism and industrialism.[20]

While transgressive methods can be useful in promoting certain ideas, they can also be self-defeating. Eventually, audiences will become desensitized to efforts by composers to shock. Indeed, what was formerly shocking or transgressive may become routine and expected. This is “recuperation,” as presented by the Situationist International[21], a very small but enormously influential international political movement consisting of the intellectual efforts of Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, and a few others, which operated between 1957 and 1972.[22] In his book *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Raol Vaneigem argued that revolutionaries and revolutionary artists must practice “detournement”, whereby the artist reuses well-known advertisements, slogans, or other media symbols to create a new work, thereby converting the mainstream into something revolutionary. The Situationist International argued that revolutionaries must constantly work to stay ahead of the inevitable absorption of their work into the main stream, while simultaneously trying to make the main stream revolutionary again.

The “Yes-Men”, a group of performance artists who specialize in the impersonation of high ranking officials in international organizations, effectively practice what might be described as detournement to ensure a continuing supply of fresh audiences to which they can provide a transgressive message. They operate by setting up

websites that are clones of organizations such as the World Trade Organization, international energy conglomerates, and others. They collect invitations to participate in conferences and speaking engagements from businesses and organizations who, unaware, stumble upon these cloned websites, thinking they legitimately represented the organizations they parody. The speeches the Yes Men give tend to consist of humiliating and humorous critiques of the organizations they purport to represent, often through extreme exaggeration of the organizations' actual policies and activities. They have successfully infiltrated the World Trade Organization[23], Dow Chemicals Corporation, and several other corporations and organizations with their speeches and displays. The series of parody websites they continue to maintain have also generated a steady stream of fresh audiences who do not expect to receive a transgressive message, thus improving their chances of remaining ahead of the desensitization.[24]

### 2.4.3 Transgressive Art as Social Research

Transgressive art can also be used to conduct social experiments. By crossing boundaries, one can better understand the structure of peoples' belief systems and the structure of social interaction. Marina Abramović, for example, sees her extreme performances as “a series of experiments identifying and defining limits... of an audience's relationship with a performer; of art, and by extension, of the codes that govern society.” She seeks to “discover a method, through art, to make people more free.”[25] Similarly, John Duncan describes his work as “existential research” — “a transmission of energy through which [Duncan] seeks to compel the audience to actively participate in the process of investigation and self-discovery...”[26].

This research usually does not take the form of scientifically structured studies with controlled experiments, but it still can provide heightened understanding. The gray area of intersection between science and art is a fascinating and growing field that challenges our traditional categories of art and science.[27] In these works, experimentation tends to mean the creation of situations with indeterminate outcomes. While the artists may have hypotheses as to what the results of the situations they engineer will be, there is no intrinsic expectation that their “art” carry traditional

scientific rigor. In this way, the arts can be freed of a burden incumbent on scientific processes to make all of the observations and discoveries explicitly definable. With an artistic approach, the bandwidth of experience can be much higher — it can include things that are not easily articulated or measured.

## 2.5 Why Make Interactive Art?

It is a very different experience to perform in a symphony than to listen to it. While most interactive art does not make demands on its participants as large as those made of an orchestral performer, the analogy is still useful to distinguish between the aesthetic experience of an interactive piece versus a passive piece. In an interactive piece, the audience is concerned not just with experiencing the piece, but also contributing to its realization. This can be useful to an artist in some circumstances.

Interaction tends to alter perception because the participant’s mind is at least partly pre-occupied with the mechanics of the interaction. Our conscious minds have limited bandwidth to actively and critically perceive the world. By engaging it with a consuming activity, it is possible to create a type of situation which W. Timothy Gallaway calls “Overload” in his book *The Inner Game of Music*. By occupying a participant with the mechanics of interaction, it is possible to temporarily bypass a participant’s critical analysis of the work or its message.[28]

It is not necessary that an interactive work result in “overload” for the interactivity to be useful. Even with less demanding interaction, a participant’s sense of accomplishment or responsibility in the production of the piece is all that is desired or required by the artist.

Often artists have a specific political or moral message they wish to make with their works. In a paper on pedagogical methods, Richard Gregory claims that there are three basic kinds of learning: *formal learning* (such as reading or arithmetic), *intuitive learning* (understandings based on common sense), and *interactive learning* (hands-on physical exploration).[29] Most non-interactive art occupies the formal or intuitive pathways, but interactive art can use hands-on learning, which in some cases can be a more effective pedagogical method. Interactive learning is learning by doing

— one doesn't just learn the rules, but physically enacts them and receives direct feedback from those actions.

However, some critics find interactive art to be “annoying”. A critical article in the New York Times in 2005 entitled “Art That Puts You in the Picture, Like It or Not” rails against the use of interactivity in art at the 2005 Boston Cyberarts Festival.

Interactive art is irritating.... Alas, some cyberworks combine all the annoyances of interactive art (prurience, ritual, ungraciousness and moral superiority) to produce a mega-annoyance: total frustration.... What a relief [it would be] to just stand there and watch the apocalyptic montage! No interaction. No instruction. No insults.” [30]

Ultimately, the choice of interactive art over non-interactive art is an aesthetic choice similar to that of choosing one medium over another, not unlike choosing sculpture rather than painting. In this paper, I have chosen to focus on interactive art, as each of the works of mine I will be discussing is interactive.

## Chapter 3

# Inhibit: Performer and Audience Roles

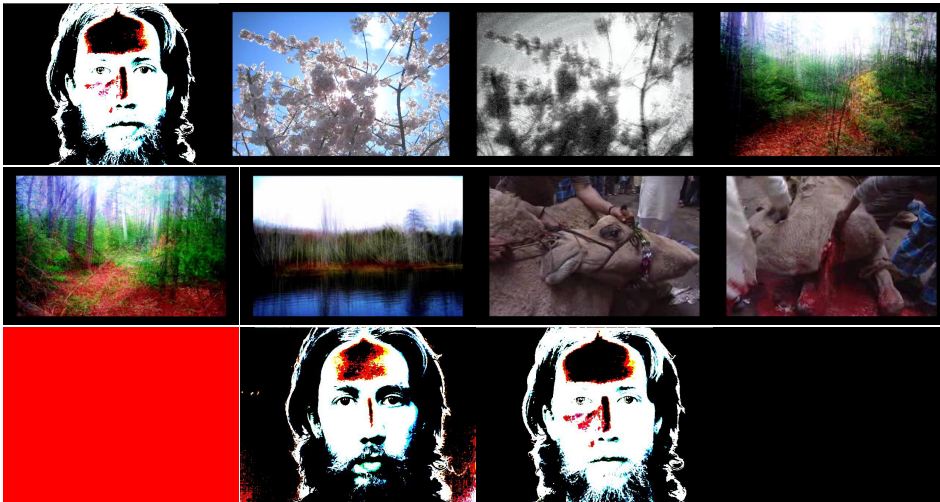


Figure 3.1: Stills from the *Inhibit* video sequence

### 3.1 Synopsis

*Inhibit* premiered in April, 2006 at the Dartmouth New Music Festival in Hanover, New Hampshire. It is a performance piece for speakers, microphones, projected image,

person behind curtains, and audience.

At the beginning of the piece, a microphone on a stand is placed at the front of each aisle of the auditorium. The screen shows only a large, stylized face staring at the audience, the colors shifting slightly, with the occasional blink. When the microphones are ready, the face speaks, with an other-worldly, gravelly voice, not quite human, but not very obviously mechanical or robotic. The voice is somewhat menacing. It says assertively, "It's my turn to speak. I have something to say."

The face fades out, and a video sequence begins to play, with a soundtrack consisting of soothing, soft sounds, with a bell-like character reminiscent of an electronic piano. The video consists of jittery images of cherry blossoms, passing clouds and the sun against a blue sky. This image disintegrates slightly into pixelated grays, and then reforms once again before switching to a new scene. The new scene consists of blurry images of a lake, with trees in the background and hues more intense than reality. The sound reflects this transition with a new bassiness, and a plodding, methodical rhythm. The camera view moves slowly to shore, and enters the forest. Trees pass by more quickly, as a sound like that of clattering wood begins to rise from the droneish ostinato. Dead sticks and fallen trees join the live ones. The view passes over leaves, and through a dense forest of fantastic color. A few people enter the frame, walking in front of the camera — with familiar clothes and wool caps, looking back and smiling. Their images fade out as a more discordant din joins us.

There is a slam of a broken piano, with a flashed image of blood. A moment passes, then a distorted voice screams "ATTACK!" A fast, pounding beat and noise come in, as flashing and flickering images hit the screen. A camel is being slaughtered, with gallons of blood pouring out. This visceral image hits strongly enough that we scarcely notice the alternating frames of a woman, and a man — is that a porno? Faces contorted in pleasure, superimposed over the gaping red wound of the camel, slaughtered by people that might be Arabs, or at least mid-eastern or north African, definitely "other".<sup>1</sup> The video loops as the sounds increase, thundering crashing

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<sup>1</sup>This, obviously, is relative to the demographic of the audience. An audience member who identifies with the dress and activity of the people on screen will see this differently. Still, the important feature — the contrast between these people and the earlier scenes of a New England forest — is evident.



sounds joining the hard driving beats and noise and screaming, and finally with a last crash, red color swells up and fills the screen, a bright red, which pulses along with a swell and fall of bassy sounds. This slowly fades, and we are greeted again by the face from the beginning. The face speaks out, asserting "It's your turn to speak. Don't you have something to say?" The face then stares at the audience, waiting.

At this point, the performer of the piece takes the controls, unseen in the projection booth, controlling in real time which video sequences appear on the screen, and selecting sounds that the audience members make to manipulate. The performer monitors the sounds coming in the microphones, and chooses particular sounds to capture as loops, which then play through the speakers.

## 3.2 Intentions

My intentions with *Inhibit* were to create a situation in which the audience was forced to encounter their own inhibitions. The piece presents a situation in which it is both very uncomfortable to speak publicly (and thus the audience would be inhibited from doing so), and they are asked to do so, with awkward silence as the only other recourse. As one of the first intentionally transgressive works I produced, the piece's tactics may come across as particularly heavy-handed: it opens with a soothing section intended to lull the audience into a false sense of security, and then attacks them with a brutal and ugly section depicting violence and pornography.

While I had hoped that it not be immediately obvious, I did intend for there be a thematic connection between the introductory and middle sections of *inhibit*. The introductory section shows scenes of New England forests with college-aged students wearing clothing typical of American students in a cold climate. This contrasts with the violent section that takes place in some unspecified mid-eastern country, involving the slaughter of a camel. The intent was to juxtapose a very "American" scene — people hiking in the woods — with a mid-eastern village's slaughter, to highlight the differences between American students' lifestyles and those of people the mid-east. Given the current world political conflicts, this juxtaposition calls to mind countries that have been invaded by American troops. Further, the alternating pornographic

images are positioned on screen such that the wounds cut in the camel correspond with the pornographers' sexual organs. These statements and juxtapositions might seem to provide material for comment or discussion, should anyone wish to speak to it in the final section of the piece. However, the metaphors and images are so blunt that they don't admit to meaningful discussion easily. The messages presented in the video are not reasoned analyses in the least, but rather empty provocative assertions contributing to the awkward difficulty of being asked to comment. It was my goal to create a scenario where people would feel compelled to speak, but it would be extremely uncomfortable to do so.

I did not know what would happen once the audience was asked to speak, but I imagined two possibilities that I would consider successful outcomes: first, that the audience would remain silent, and that this awkward silence would last for a long time. This awkward silence, I felt, would help to emphasize the inhibited nature of the audience. The second potentially successful outcome would have been the audience actually speaking, and engaging other audience members in the topics at hand: namely, the content that had been presented on screen, and the notion of inhibition. This breakdown of inhibitions could have been just as successful at highlighting the inhibition that would normally have been present. The most likely outcome that I would have considered a failure is people clapping or making random noise, rather than speaking. To combat this, I intended to use the video controls to "punish" responses that I did not like by switching to the violent imagery, and to "reward" responses I did like by switching to the softer and soothing imagery. Thus, I intended to respond directly to the audience in a heavy-handed way, manipulating their responses in a lopsided dialog.

*Inhibit* relates to the following pieces I will discuss most closely in its transgression of audience expectations — both of the expected content of a performance, and of the roles of audience and performer. Traditionally, the performer provides an experience for the audience, fulfilling an expected role. The audience (depending on the performance type) is often expected to passively<sup>2</sup> absorb the performance,

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<sup>2</sup>While some may argue that audiences are expected to "listen actively", audiences are still rarely expected to contribute to the experience of other audience members, aside from their mere presence

following a code of etiquette.

### 3.3 Expectations of Content

Audiences expect that performers will do certain things in performances. There is an implicit contract between a performer and the audience, which relies on the audience's expectations of what will happen. These expectations differ depending on the type of performance—attendees at a heavy metal concert will expect a very different sort of show from attendees at the Boston Pops.

*Inhibit* transgresses audience expectations for content by presenting shocking and disturbing images, including death, blood, and pornography, in the setting of a “new music” concert, where one traditionally would expect the content to be more staid. These unpleasant images are preceded by much calmer images depicting slow moving nature scenes accompanied by soft, droning music, heightening the contrast. Further, there isn't an immediately obvious reason for this juxtaposition — it seems that the introduction is designed simply to lull the audience into a false sense of security, where the following clashing violence is intended simply to shock. (Why a camel? Why pornography?) Here, the transgressive content is directly related to the meaning in the piece: audiences are inhibited. The performance of the piece casts off the usual performer's inhibitions by willingly bombarding the audience with “shocking” content. Simultaneously, the piece asks the audience to consider where their own inhibitions lie.

*Inhibit* attempts to use transgression for all three of the rationales for transgressive artwork described above: it presents disturbing imagery and harsh sounds to generate the aesthetic experience that accompanies them. It uses the transgressive medium as a method of delivering a conceptual payload — namely, commentary on the notion of inhibitions and expectations. And finally, the piece is a social experiment, in that it presents a socially awkward situation in which audience members are expected to make sound, in a concert context where such contributions would normally be forbidden.

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and applause.

### 3.3.1 Fluxus

The 1960's saw a movement in art known as *Fluxus*, started by George Maciunas in 1962. The Fluxus movement was characterized by “intermedia” works that blend various art forms, but it also became known for the frequently political nature of many of its artists' works. Fluxus artists such as La Monte Young and Philip Corner challenged the content of piano performance. La Monte Young's 1960 piece *Piano Piece for David Tudor #1* violates an audience's expectation for sound. The instructions for the performer are as follows:

Bring a bale of hay and a bucket of water onto the stage for the piano to eat and drink. The performer may then feed the piano or leave it to eat by itself. The piece is over after the piano has been fed, or after the piano eats or decides not to.[31]

Obviously, a piano will not eat hay; nor will a piano drink water. Hence, the performer may “feed” the piano (potentially to its detriment, especially if the water is included), but the piece will not make sound in the way an audience expects a piano piece to make sound. This piece abuses audience's expectations for the content of a performance in a similar (though less harsh) manner to that used by *Inhibit* — it presents what is purported to be a piano piece, but the piano is not played (at least not in the normal sense).

Fluxus artist Philip Corner produced a piece in 1969 which takes this non-existence of performance further. In *Anti-Personnel Bomb*, the program notes read as follows:

An anti-personnel CBU-Type cluster bomb unit will be thrown into the audience.[32]

The performance consists of the announcement of the cancellation of the piece. The piece is clearly unperformable, at least without the performers being guilty of mass murder. Still, it invites the audience to imagine what the performance would be like — body parts of audience members torn apart, from a disturbingly simple action on the part of the people on stage. This piece was premiered at the height of the Vietnam War, and as such, carries visceral, albeit ambiguous, associations with the

war. While the piece was never intended to be realized (that is, there was never an intention that a bomb actually be thrown into the audience), even the possibility of its performance forces the audience to imagine the consequences.

### 3.4 Expectations of Roles

Even if the content of the performance is not transgressive, a performance can violate audience expectations by making abnormal demands on the type of participation expected of the audience. Consider the chart in the following figure, to be filled in as an assignment for elementary school kids. The children are asked to identify which types of activity are appropriate in which types of concerts.

Type of event									
Behaviors	Sporting Event	Movie	Live Theater	Rock Concert	Jazz Concert	Orch Concert	Ballet	Opera	School Performance
Eat									
Talk									
Cheer during action or performance									
Stand up or walk around during action or performance									
Give a standing ovation									
Applaud at end									
Clap along in time with music									

Figure 3.2: Classroom activity provided as part of the “Arts Toolkit” by Kentucky Educational TV [33]

I will leave the answers as an activity to the reader. While the authors of the chart left out “New Music Concert” in their list of event types, we can probably safely assume that the expected etiquette for it would be somewhere between “Jazz Concert”

and “Orchestra Concert.” Typically, in a performance setting, the audience does not expect to be directly involved in the performance of a piece (they expect the pieces to be non-interactive). This expectation becomes an inhibition when the audience is suddenly asked to directly participate, without forewarning. Audience roles are primarily formed by social norms which govern our behavior in a wide variety of circumstances. This is a necessary component of most human interaction. David Hume argued, in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, that by necessity all agents involved in any coordinated activity must know what behavior to expect from one another. Without these expectations, mutually beneficial interaction would be impossible.[34] Later philosophers and social theorists have substantially agreed with this principle.[35] As it is such a central part of human experience, these social norms provide a poignant area for artists to explore.

### 3.4.1 Rhythm 5

In 1974, Marina Abramović performed a piece entitled *Rhythm 5*.

I construct a five-pointed star (made of wood and wood chips soaked in 100 litres of petrol). I set fire to the star. I walk around it. I cut my hair and throw the clumps into each point of the star. I cut my toe-nails and throw the clippings into each point of the star. I walk into the star and lie down on the empty surface. Lying down, I fail to notice that the flames have used up all the oxygen. I lose consciousness. The viewers do not notice, because I am supine. When a flame touches my leg and I still show no reaction, two viewers come into the star and carry me out of it. I am confronted with my physical limitations, the performance is cut short. Afterwards I wonder how I can use my body — conscious and otherwise — without disrupting the performance.[36]

The piece makes a strong demand on audience participation: without intervention on the part of the viewers, the performer will die. And further, this intervention necessarily ends the performance. The social norms of a performance setting dictate that one should normally not intervene and stop the performance of a piece. Here,

a viewer must be sure enough that something is wrong to be willing to risk exposing himself to the criticism of the audience by intervening.

### 3.4.2 Cut Piece, Rhythm 0

In contrast to the unexpected need for intervention in Abramović's *Rhythm 5*, the audience is explicitly instructed to intervene in an earlier performance art piece by Yoko Ono entitled *Cut Piece*, and similarly in Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (another work in her "Rhythm" series). In Ono's 1964 *Cut Piece*, Ono sits on stage, and invites the audience to come up to her and cut her clothing off. She covers her breasts at the moment of unbosoming.[37] Art historians have described this performance as a "violation" of Ono — "More like a rape than an art performance." [38] The violence of this interaction between the audience and performer was made much more vivid by Abramović in *Rhythm 0*, first performed 10 years after Ono's performance. Abramović placed 72 objects on a table in front of her, including pens, scissors, chains, an axe, knives, and most notoriously, a loaded gun, and invited the audience to use them on her as they wished. She sat for 6 hours, immobile, while the audience directed the action entirely. A reviewer said of the performance:

The participants became involved slowly at first, but after a while Ms. Abramović's clothes were cut off, and her body marked, burned and cut. Finally, a man took the gun and made her put it up to her head, trying to force her to squeeze the trigger. She didn't resist, but a fight ensued as other spectators intervened. "This was the only performance where I was really ready to die," [Abramović said].[39]

This slow breakdown of audience inhibitions was also evident in the audience's response to being asked to comment in *Inhibit* in its performance at Dartmouth College in April, 2004 (discussed below), though without the accompanying imminent threats to life.

### 3.4.3 Back to You

In 1974, Chris Burden performed a provocative piece entitled *Back to You*. In it, Burden lay down in a freight elevator wearing only pants, with a small bowl of push pins next to him. Visitors were led in, and instructed by a sign in the elevator to push the pins into Burden as the car moved to the basement and back. Upon the car's return to the ground floor, the visitor was instructed to leave, and the doors closed, with Burden still inside. Spectators watched the performance on a video monitor. Josh Baer, curator of a 2004 exhibit of "relics" from Burden's early performance art work, described the effect as follows:

The work is indeed gruesome, but more importantly, the act of stabbing becomes a physical transgression of established social mores which traditionally dictate that it is unlawful or immoral to self-mutilate. Here, as in many of the early performances, Burden takes back the power over his own body by willfully assigning it to someone else.[40]

Burden's piece not only asks the audience to participate in its creation, but also to do so in a way most audience members would likely be very inhibited from doing: by physically injuring Chris Burden.

### 3.4.4 Sonic Meditations

Burden, Ono and Abramović's pieces all explore the effects of asking (or requiring) individuals to act in violation of social norms in the performance. The audience members become part of the spectacle that the rest of the audience views, putting tremendous pressure on them.

Another class of performances might include those in which an individual visitor interacts with the work without the burden of peer pressure. These works might still be transgressive in nature, but would transgress via different means. Pauline Oliveros performed a series of "Sonic Meditations" in the 1970's which asked audiences to participate in the performance in ways that were more introspective. For example, Oliveros' 1969 *Teach Yourself to Fly* instructs the audience as follows:



Any number of persons sit in a circle facing the centre. Illuminate the space with dim blue light. Begin by simply observing your own breathing. Always be an observer. Gradually allow your breathing to become audible. Then gradually introduce your voice. Allow your vocal cords to vibrate in any mode which occurs naturally. Allow the intensity of the vibrations to increase very slowly. Continue as long as possible, naturally, and until all others are quiet, always observing your own breath cycle. Variation: translate voice to an instrument.[41]

Could an audience member attending a performance like this really observe passively, and not participate? While there is no direct social pressure in the form of a threat against someone's life, there is still tremendous pressure from the group for each person to participate. The participation, however, is largely internally focused, and a participant could easily fade into the group without being noticed. Each participant is asked to observe his or her own breath, primarily, and not to be concerned with others, except for the conclusion of the piece. The meditative character highlights a performance which does not pit the participant against other participants or the performer, but rather asks the participant to explore his or her self.

### 3.5 Evaluation of *Inhibit*

When I performed *Inhibit* at Dartmouth college, the audience remained silent for a time, unsure what to do — a very welcome (to me) uncomfortable silence, as the face continued to stare at them, and they at the face. After a minute, to prompt a response, I briefly switched the screen to the discordant noise and bloody images from before, before returning to the face which quickly prompted them again: "Don't you have something to say?" Finally, the more brave in the audience began to cautiously test the waters. Someone in the back let out a whoop. A couple of people clap their hands. I captured the sound of the whoop and looped it, playing it back through the speakers. A person toward the front yelled out, "Shock Value!" Her words began looping through the speakers as well. More people made sounds, a few more gave yells, but very few people uttered any words. Occasionally, I switched the video to the discordant noise

and violence, occasionally to the soothing sounds and cherry blossoms, but always returned to the stare. After a couple of minutes, the looped samples had built up to a zoo-like din of noises was coming from the speakers, including the repeating sounds of the whooping, hollering, yelling, clapping and cat calls from the audience. The image faded to black and the sound went silent, ending the piece.

In an ironic twist, it was my inhibitions, as the performer, which altered the progression of the piece in its final section: after a lengthy awkward silence, I began to loop utterances of the audience that I would have originally considered to be not worth capturing — the yelps and whoops. I had originally intended only to capture speech content to encourage others to speak, but in the stress of the performance, I captured non-speech yells as well, since it was all anyone was doing.

In contrast to the other transgressive pieces described in this section, *Inhibit* comes across as overly contrived, overbearing, and forced. It lacks the transparency of Oliveros' *Meditations*, the simplicity of Burden's *Back to You*, and the focus of Corner's *Anti-personnel Bomb*. The complexity of a sequenced video, a "man behind the curtains" driving the closing video and audio sampling, and the narrative obscure the intended commentary on audiences' inhibitions. A more successful piece would do away with this complexity to present its meaning more elegantly and obviously.

# Chapter 4

## Still



Figure 4.1: Stills from the *Still* installation

### 4.1 Synopsis

Still is an installation piece for projected video, video camera, computer and audience. It is installed in a room with an open doorway, arranged so a person walking past the

doorway is not immediately visible to the camera, but upon walking in the room, the visitor is “seen” by the camera.

Upon entering the room, visitors are presented with an image of themselves, with dancing paper-cutout style figures and flashing text superimposed on top, in a style reminiscent of an early arcade video game. The words on the screen flash commands at the viewer — “Dance!”, “Raise your right arm!”, “Other right, silly!”, “Plan your future!”, “Game Over!”, “Plan your past!” In the top left, a point counter increases (decreases? there is a negative sign in front), counting attempts by the viewer to follow the instructions and move around, or to move at all. In the bottom left is a “high score” indicator. The sound — rather loud, very annoying “circus music” — is playing continuously. The whole scene is disorienting, and generally annoying and unpleasant.

The visitors might begin to notice after playing with the machine for a bit that it does not matter which movements they make, the point ticker keeps counting down with each movement. Also, they might notice that if they stay still for a few seconds, the screen changes — it cuts to black, the circus music stops, and some pictures of nature come up. More soothing, droning music comes on. But as soon as a visitor moves again, back come the dancing stick figures, flashing words, superimposed over the visitor’s image. This might incite him or her to remain still for longer, so as to be greeted by the nature scenes again. At any point, if someone moves, the system returns the circus music, and the visitors must again remain still in order to return to the beginning of the video sequence again. Indeed, if another person walks into the room, he or she will trigger the dancing dolls and circus music. To stay in the more soothing imagery and sound, it is necessary not only to stay still, but to get others in the room to stay still as well.

The more soothing nature sequence is not just a steady state, it has a progression: the amplitude and complexity of the background increases, percussive sounds start joining the drones, and the imagery changes — the screen shows pictures of a pier, the ocean, wind mills, a red desert with a road, and more. A very patient observer will see the sequence end, and will notice barely audible, rhythmically chanted words coming forward in the mix. After this, the screen goes black, and the soundtrack

fades out.

Eventually, the viewer will move, either from fatigue, or simply to leave. At this point the circus music returns.

## 4.2 Intentions

My goal with *Still* was to encourage the audience to slow down, and to remain still, even in the face of busy imperatives and music which tells them to do the opposite. In a similar manner to the “pleasant” and “unpleasant” sections in *Inhibit*, *Still* has the busy, repetitive and very annoying initial section, and the much more soothing, slower second section.

The design of the initial section mimics that of an arcade game, with flashing words where one might ordinarily see “Insert Coin!” or some similar phrase. My intent was to draw an analogy between these imperatives and the type of continual pitches most of us endure on a daily basis from countless advertisers of unnecessary commodities. The point counter on the screen counts up with each movement; the high-score counter at the bottom left makes an obvious goal for the number of movements to exceed, but both are clearly meaningless and fundamentally unsatisfying — the screen just keeps flashing instructions to move more and more, and the same annoying music repeats endlessly. Foremost in my mind in producing this was an analogy to the rat race of a modern consumer life, where the relentless pursuit of more and more material acquisitions fail to improve one’s life. By remaining still, one gets to free oneself from this barrage, and instead to see a dreamy and interesting video sequence which leads, inevitably, to nothingness (a blank screen). At that moment, if a visitor has patiently waited through the video sequence, there is nothing more to watch, and the visitor is left with just him or herself to observe. Frustratingly, any movement, even a movement to leave, will bring back the barrage from the screen, but this time it may have less impact — the visitor knows how to slow down.

While the majority of this interaction is personal, between a single visitor and the system, there is an intended social aspect — namely, that someone who has figured out that remaining still results in a more pleasant experience will likely need

to communicate this to others, to prevent them from triggering the circus music. It is hoped that this will spur communication among strangers in the gallery.

## 4.3 Coercive Artwork

In contrast with the mass performance transgressions in *Inhibit*, *Still* is personal. Rather than acting in front of a large audience, each participant interacts more or less directly with the installation, and perhaps a few other visitors. The goal of *Still* is to force visitors to behave in a certain way that they ordinarily would not. In this regard, *Still* is coercive. People are persuaded to remain still by being bombarded with annoying music and busy flashing images whenever they don't.

According to Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Arson in their 2000 book “Age of Propaganda,” there are two primary routes by which one can be persuaded: through mindless propaganda, or through thoughtful deliberation. Normally, when we think of persuasion, we think of someone being handed reasons or arguments in favor of or against a particular view. This corresponds to thoughtful deliberation. However, most modern propagandists, including advertisers, politicians, and even artists, operate through the “mindless” rout of emotional persuasion.<sup>[42]</sup> This is the mode *Still* operates in — at no point is anyone told deliberately to remain still. This differs from the pieces discussed in the previous section, such as Chris Burden's *Back to You* in which the visitor is explicitly told to push pins into Burden's body.

*Still* primarily makes use of transgression as a pedagogical tool, to make a point. If a participant enjoyed the transgressive aesthetic in use in the piece — namely, really annoying music — the piece would not function as well, as the participant would feel less compelled to prevent the music from playing by remaining still.

### 4.3.1 Graffiti Writer

The Institute for Applied Autonomy is an art organization whose mission is to research collective and self-determination, and provide technologies to aid the autonomy of activists. In 2000, the IAA produced *Graffiti Writer*, a remote-controllable vehicle

which paints field-programmable messages on the ground as it drives, in a manner similar to that of a dot-matrix printer. The IAA took the device to the streets, and offered passersby, public works officials, girl scouts, and even police the opportunity to try it out — finding almost universal willingness on the part of the public to use it, despite potential legal ramifications:

Studies have shown that in nearly 100% of the cases, a given agent of the public will willingly participate in high profile acts of vandalism, given the opportunity to do so via mediated tele-robotic technology.[43]

By simply adding a layer of technology (or indirection) in the form of a fun robotic vehicle, the IAA has been able to vandalize freely in unusual places, including the floor of a Pixar awards ceremony.[43]

In this case, the piece functions best when participants are not even aware they are being coerced. The purpose of the piece is to produce graffiti, and if participants associate the seemingly innocuous task they are doing with a criminal act, they would probably stop participating. In a manner similar to *Still's* attempts to condition participants into remaining motionless, *Graffiti Writer* attempts to condition participants into considering vandalism to be more mundane, common, and legal.

### 4.3.2 Dispersion

In 1999, the Experimental Interaction Unit produced *Dispersion*, a “pathogen dispersal unit”. This unit was a vending machine which produced and dispensed small plastic vials, purportedly containing lethal pathogens (over 50 pathogens, from Aflatoxin and Anthrax to Venezuelan equine encephalitis and Yellow fever). The machine prompted users with questions in order to select their preferred pathogen — one with the desired dispersion radius, spore survival time, infection rate, victim suffering status, and more. The stated goal of this machine was to expedite the process of obtaining pathogens:

Prior to the development of *Dispersion*, individual access to many of these pathogens required time-consuming ordering through government and/or

research labs. Individuals needlessly waited for up to a month before obtaining their pathogens. Now, for the first time, *Dispersion* is able to offer almost instant access to a plentiful selection of pathogens.<sup>[44]</sup>

In addition to vending, the machine also collected as much information as possible on each visitor, including fingerprints, images, and any data the visitor punched in the keypad.

The vending machine thus operated intrusively in two ways: first, by providing an unbelievably easy mechanism for obtaining deadly pathogens which lacked any sort of check for authority, participants proceeded to order up pathogens they would normally be quite afraid of holding. However, since the lack of expected checks or security was the only indication that the dispersal unit was not in fact delivering pathogens, participants were given the fearful sense that they had in fact received a vial of extremely deadly powder in their hands. Secondly, the intrusive data collection executed by the machine would likely leave most participants unhappy with the concomitant privacy implications. The Experimental Interaction Unit writes:

Almost immediately upon activation, questions of its public safety were raised as hundreds of small personal bio-capsules were dispensed to individuals. The contents of these capsules has never been fully disclosed. After two weeks of vending personal biological pathogens, gathering personal customer data, capturing fingerprints of thousands of individual users, collecting images, and assembling massive quantities of user preference statistics, *Dispersion* was quickly and quietly removed.<sup>[44]</sup>

The machine coerced users into giving up a wealth of personal information, and also to obtain a substance they would fear.

In a similar manner to *Still*, a participant who appreciated the transgressive aesthetic presented in *Dispersion* — that of holding their own deadly pathogens — might not experience the piece as it was meant to be experienced: the participant would not feel fear, and would not question how much the machine's setup mimics reality. Here, the transgressive aesthetic is used to coerce people into considering the implications of the system, and how real it might be.



### 4.3.3 The Symbiont

*The Symbiont* is an installation produced by Barney Haynes in 2001. It consists of a large, reclining massage chair, and a plethora of additional mechanical parts, including multiple arms that move toward the visitor. Attached to one is a monitor, to another, a nipple. A participant, assisted by a maintainer, sits down in the chair, strapping on a number of monitors and sensors. The nipple moves toward the participant's mouth. Sensors attached to the chair collect data about the visitor, including respiration, body temperature, and other vital signs. As the participant begins to suck on the nipple, the chair begins vibrating in time with the visitor's respiration. Haynes writes, "As the participant inhales and exhales the vibration of the chair ramps up and down, echoing the participant's breaths. When the breathing rhythms go out of phase, the participant is compelled to compensate. The distinction between who is controlling who becomes blurred."<sup>[45]</sup> Screens move toward the participant, displaying computer generated video sequences. If the participant stops sucking or starts breathing differently, the machine will enforce the previous pattern by shaking the participant seemingly angrily, and displaying disturbing images.<sup>[45]</sup> The participant is coerced into participating with *The Symbiont* in its own way.

Like *Still*, this work provides an immersive, coercive environment, and transgressive content intended to make the viewer uncomfortable. It also uses its coercive and transgressive apparatus as a means of conditioning the participant into a particular behavior. Unlike *Still*, *Graffiti Writer*, and *Dispersion*, however, the piece does not have an immediately apparent political message that it is attempting to make: the transgressive aesthetic itself is the goal of the piece, not a means for purveying a message. Someone who appreciates the transgressive aesthetic would likely find the piece more compelling, rather than less.

## 4.4 Evaluation of *Still*

*Still* attempts to convey a political message: that in the face of busy imperatives and instructions, one should remain still and at peace. It attempts to use a conditioning

tactic to teach this behavior to people — by providing obvious rewards for remaining still, and punishment for moving. *Still* suffers less than *Inhibit* from overly complex narratives and contrived structures, but its success still depends on whether or not the audience finds the “punishment” to be undesirable and “reward” to be compelling. In this way, it makes assumptions about the audience which may not hold true.

*Still* could also fail if the participants lack sufficient patience to see the piece through. Some participants might remain still long enough to see that this causes the system to change, and then consider themselves to have “figured it out”, considering the simple causal mechanism to be the entirety of the piece. The simple interactive causal mechanism could distract from the content of the piece and any further meaning it attempts to draw.

These difficulties aside, I think *Still* is one of the more successful pieces of mine I will be discussing here. It lacks the utility of *Graffiti Writer*, or the social import of *Dispersion*, but I believe it succeeds at its more modest goals of presenting the notion of stillness in the face of business.

# Chapter 5

## Community



Figure 5.1: One of the *Community* cranks.

### 5.1 Synopsis

Two cranks sit in two rooms, adjacent to each other. There is a door connecting the two rooms. The cranks are at hand level, and can be turned. Speakers are placed

in the corners of each room. If a participant turns one of the cranks, sound starts to come out of the speakers in the opposite room — loud, uncomfortable sound. It is the sound of speech, but it is layered so thickly and is variable enough in speed that it is difficult to make out who the speaker is, or what is being said (or for that matter, that it is speech at all). The harder one turns the crank, the louder the sound is in the opposite room. The same is true for the opposite room — turning its crank results in oppressively loud sound in the first room.

If both cranks are turned simultaneously, an interaction occurs: turning a crank reduces one's own volume (in a sense, reducing the efficacy of the neighboring crank's amplifications). Thus, the crank that is turned the fastest will cause noise in the opposite room, but that noise will be proportional in volume to the speed of the opposite room's cranking. Furthermore, the efficacy of one's cranking decreases gradually over time — if a participant turns the crank at a steady speed for a period of time, that effective amplification of the opposite room and attenuation of his or her own room will decrease, requiring the participant to crank harder to achieve the same levels. If both cranks are turned simultaneously at the same rate, the harsh loud sounds drop away from both rooms, and a more pleasant, rhythmic sound comes out of both speakers.

Participants are not told of the mechanics or behavior of the system in advance; they are left to figure it out.

## 5.2 Intentions

My intention with *Community* was to create a situation where the goals of self-interest and the goals of community interest intersect — but in a specific way: I wanted to make it so people had to pay a great amount of attention to each other. I intended to draw an analogy between the situation constructed in the piece and the real dynamics of working as a community. In real social interactions, an action of any one person results in an impact on other persons involved in the interaction. Thus, in order to operate genuinely with community interest rather than self interest, it is necessary to make a significant effort to pay attention to the other members of the community.

An additional analogy that I had in mind with this piece is that of the dynamic between stronger and weaker members of an interaction — be they nation states, or just individuals with different endowments. In *Community*, a stronger person turning one crank can easily cause an excess of noise for a weaker person turning the other. However, the more the stronger person does so, the more his or her cranking decreases in effectiveness. It is my belief that exercise of excess force is ultimately self defeating, and I hoped to convey this notion.

### 5.3 Social Experiments

*Community* presents participants with a dilemma: if they pursue a path of self-interest by turning the crank to reduce their own volumes, they harm the people in the opposite room by raising theirs. In this way, the piece invites participants to consider the relationship between self-interest and cooperation. This dichotomy is the subject of Game Theoretical problems such as the “Prisoner’s Dilemma”.<sup>1</sup> These games, however, often operate on the assumption that all players are behaving with “rational self-interest”, or what Tor Nørretranders terms “*Homo economicus*.” However, as Nørretranders argues in his book *The Generous Man, Homo economicus* does not exist in real people: real people behave with spite, affection, and other traits that diminish their effectiveness as rational self-serving agents. Tests have shown that in games such as the “Ultimatum Game”<sup>2</sup>, players do not behave with rational self-interest.

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<sup>1</sup>In the classical Prisoner’s Dilemma, two players are given a choice to either stay silent or betray the other. If both players stay silent, they each receive small penalties. If both players betray, they each receive a large penalties. If one player stays silent and the other betrays, the betraying player gets no penalty, and the silent player gets a large penalty. The game is also played in iterated versions, where the same players face the choice to remain silent or betray each other multiple times.[\[46\]](#)

<sup>2</sup>In the Ultimatum Game, one player is given \$100, and asked to divide it between himself and a second player in any way he sees fit. If the second player accepts the offer, the money is divided according to the offer. If the second player rejects the offer (say, for example, the offer is for \$5 out of the \$100, and the player considers it too greedy), neither player gets any money. Despite the fact that \$5 is better than \$0, many players will refuse an inequitable offer — even in cases where the participants know they will never interact with the person suggesting the inequitable offer again (i.e., there is no rational advantage in “teaching the wrong-doer a lesson”).

Do you really want to hurt yourself just to get back at me? As it turns out, you do. The ultimatum game has been played by thousands of people. . . . The results have been amazing every time: people refuse the money if they think the other player is behaving too greedily.[47, p 2]

Many works of art operate as “social experiments” in which audience members are pitted against each other in competition. They have the potential to reveal insights into human behavior that are not discovered by traditional logical analysis.

### 5.3.1 Synchronomatic Baseball

Howard Fried performed a piece in 1971 entitled *Synchronomatic Baseball*. For the piece, Fried selected teams for a game of baseball among 20 of his friends. Unbeknownst to the players, he filled the teams by dividing his friends into “dominant” and “indominant” personality types.

Fried created a psychological and visual metaphor for opposing psychological types.... The two teams were named Dommy (for dominants) and Indo (for indominant types). Members of the teams were not informed of the meaning of the team’s name, nor of Fried’s motives for choosing them.... The dommies functioned with efficiency and quickly created a hierarchy of power, while the Indos had neither leadership nor organization.[37, p. 113–114]

The transgressive aspect of this piece is simply the fact that the participants of the baseball game were unwitting participants in a social experiment to examine the differences in behavior between dominant and indominant personality types. Fried found his instincts about the dominance or lack thereof in particular friends of his to also manifest at the group organizational level.

### 5.3.2 Gallery Shooting Gallery

The Experimental Interaction Unit (mentioned earlier for their piece *Dispersion*) worked toward producing a piece entitled *Gallery Shooting Gallery* in 2001.<sup>3</sup> The piece involved a robotic gun which participants could control from a website, to fire on gallery visitors. The gun used was to be a “shockwave vortex gun,” which fires a burst of compressed air, resulting in a sensation similar to being hit with a pillow. The software for web control of the gun also collects low-level data about the shooter’s computer — data “far beyond what is typically contained in access logs,” [48] all without the user’s knowledge. This data is then displayed publicly, along with a video clip of the user’s shot.

The experiment being proposed in *Gallery Shooting Gallery* deals with the “intensely intimate and visceral experience of firing a live weapon at another human being.” [48] However, it does so via an electronically mediated system, in the same way that the Institute for Applied Autonomy mediated the creation of graffiti using *Graffiti Writer*. It is unfortunate that the piece was not completed, but we can speculate that the electronic mediation might result in a greater willingness on the part of remote users to fire the weapon at people. The extent to which the system intrusively collects data from participants’ computers heightens the social commentary on this mediation — not only is our society becoming increasingly electronically mediated, but the very means of this mediation allows for more complete records of every action and a reduction in privacy.

### 5.3.3 Antiorp

“Antiorp” — also known as “Netochka Nezvanova” (abbreviated “nn”), “=cw4t7abs”, “kr0p3ROM”, “the entity”, and “integer”, was an enigmatic figure who dominated several Internet mailing lists from 1995 until the early 2000’s. “She” (his/her/its gender was not known; it has been widely speculated that her work is that of a collection

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<sup>3</sup>The EIU stopped work on *Gallery Shooting Gallery* after the attacks on the world trade center on Sept. 11, 2001, because “the important relevance of *Gallery Shooting Gallery* was diminished in light of 9.11.01” [48].

of people) frequented mailing lists, especially those relating to electronic music, sending huge quantities of messages in a style reminiscent of hacker-cultural “leet speech”<sup>4</sup> (see figure 5.2 for an example message). The messages, while seemingly nonsensical

Empire = body.

hensz nn - simply.SUPERIOR

per chansz auss! ‘reazon‘ nn = regardz geert lovink + h!z !lk  
 az ultra outdatd + p!t!fl pre.90.z ueztern kap!tal!zt buffoonz

ent!tl!ng u korporat fasc!ztz = haz b!n 01 error ov zortz on m! part.  
 [ma!z ! = z!mpl! ador faz!on]  
 geert lovink + ekxtra 1 d!menz!onl kr!!!!ketz [e.g. dze ultra unevntfl \  
 borrrrrrr!ng andreas broeckmann. alex galloway etc]  
 = do not dze konzt!tuz!on pozez 2 komput dze teor!e much  
 elsz akt!vat 01 lf+ !nundaz!e.

jetzt ! = return 2 z!p!ng tea + !zolat!ng m! celllz 4rom ur funerl.  
 vr!!endl!.nn

1. ventuze.nn

```

  /_/_
        \           /
        \          \
        \_ {        \_ {
        \_ {/
                i should like to be a human plant

        \_ \
                i will shed leaves in the shade

```

Figure 5.2: Example message from Netochka Nezvanova[50, ch. 4]

<sup>4</sup>“Leet-speak”, or “1337”, or “10100111001” , is a sociolect that arose from Bulletin Board System culture in the early 1980’s. Users of some early BBS’s who had been on the servers for long enough were granted seniority status, which afforded privileges such as higher bandwidth, more file storage space, and access to special chat-rooms and services. These users were called “elite”, the word from which “leet” derives. Apparently in an early effort to thwart word filtering that was used to detect illegal activity such as sharing in unlicensed software (“warez”), users began mutating words to avoid detection. Hence, ‘e’ becomes ‘3’, ‘t’ becomes ‘7’, and so on. The use of this type of lexicon became a status symbol in itself among some users.[49]



on the surface, have an apparent meaning if one takes the time to decode them (e.g., replace “!” with “i”, replace + with “and”). The content of the messages tended toward radical anti-capitalist, anti-fascist political messages. In addition to these messages, Antiorp also produced software — a video augmentation of the MaxMSP programming environment called *Nato.0+55*, which was sold commercially for upwards of \$550. The website selling the software also levied an arbitrary \$9.55 tariff on all American customers. As one of the first video processing softwares of its kind, *Nato.0+55* reached wide usage among those seeking to edit video in real time (the software was also used in the aforementioned *Symbiont* by Barney Haynes). As a result of her frequent postings on mailing lists and tendency to attack those who disagreed with her, several mailing lists attempted to ban her user accounts, preventing her from accessing the lists. In response to these and other perceived slights, Antiorp would revoke the software licenses of those she felt were responsible. Florian Cramer describes this in his book *Words Made Flesh*:

The project presented itself as a sectarian cult, with its software as the object of worship. In a wilful perversion of proprietary software licensing, NATO licenses were revoked if licensees critically commented upon Netochka Nezvanova in public. The business model was to let people buy into an underground and a cult. Digital artist Alexei Shulgin characterized N.N. as a corporation posing as an artist, reciprocal to artists who had posed as corporations before. Local cults of NATO VJs used N.N. style in their names and acronyms.[50, ch. 4]

By having something that artists needed — the only software of its kind — Antiorp was able to throw her weight around in ways that other “trolls” of internet mailing lists might not be able to. She would mail-bomb lists and individuals with hundreds of messages a day, clogging them, and turning all discussion into a discussion about her. Frequently, advocates of free speech or supporters of Antiorp’s cause would continue to forward her messages to the lists after she was kicked off. Her persona became what many people considered interesting and legitimate work of art.[51]

Antiorp seemed to be operating from all three of the rationales for transgressive artwork theorized above: her messages promote a transgressive aesthetic, convey anti-capitalist and other moralistic messages, and also operate in ways that could be considered experiments with social interaction in the medium of internet mailing lists. In addition, her work was sufficiently reviled, anti-social and legitimately destructive that its status as “art” is potentially in question: many who suffered her wrath would likely dispute that categorization.

### 5.3.4 Maze, Scare

John Duncan performed a piece in 1976 called *Maze*. For the piece, Duncan knocked on the doors of two friends, wearing a full-head mask. When each friend answered the door, he drew a pistol loaded with blanks, fired it point blank, and ran away.[26] Presumably, these “friends” had no idea that the person assaulting them was Duncan, and it is unclear whether they were informed later. Duncan claimed that this exercise was a “response to meaningless attack from complete strangers.”[26] The work highlights a strained relationship between identityless strangers and friends — and a potentially dangerous social experiment to explore that relationship.

In 1995, Duncan performed another piece which pitted him against an unsuspecting audience. In *Maze*, Duncan locked himself and seven gallery visitors, “naked and blind”, in a basement room overnight. The question Duncan claimed to be asking is, “What happens when you’re left alone with your own mind without any distractions and don’t know when it will end?”[26] Duncan repeated the exercise in 1996 at the Narrenturm Museum for Pathological Diseases in Vienna. In that showing, Duncan played video composed of stills taken during the first performance of *Maze*, and then randomly selected viewers from the gallery to be locked in a basement room which had formerly been used as a containment room for “disturbed patients”. [26] In both cases, Duncan alone was aware of what was going on, and of how long the participants would be locked up. This created a strong dynamic of power between the (powerless) audience and the artist.

Like Antiorp, Duncan’s *Maze* and *Scare* are sufficiently transgressive that some

participants might find their work to have crossed the line from legitimate art and social experimentation to dangerously anti-social behavior. Particularly with *Maze*, questions about the legality and safety of the work abound (questions which the available public sources that discuss the work do not answer). What if a participant were diabetic, or had a sick child at home to attend to? Would participants have been let out had there been a serious altercation between them? In these works, something of a safety net that seems present in many of the other works discussed in this paper is missing.

## 5.4 Evaluation of *Community*

As social experiments go, *Community* did not provide any particularly new insights into human interaction: it instead proceeded largely as one would expect it would. Participants at first were confused about the piece, but upon discovering just what the cranks did, some people enjoyed the game-like aspect of it. The reduction in cranking efficacy turned out to be too subtle for most people to notice.

*Community* was successful insofar as participants did seem to get a sense of the interrelations between their actions and those of the other players governed the system. However, the relationships between cranking and effects on the system were neither complicated nor subtle, and the piece in that sense seemed to become a “one trick pony” — participants tried it, figured it out, and moved on. The piece seems to lack the depth necessary to create a more interested impact on the participants.

# Chapter 6

## SDD

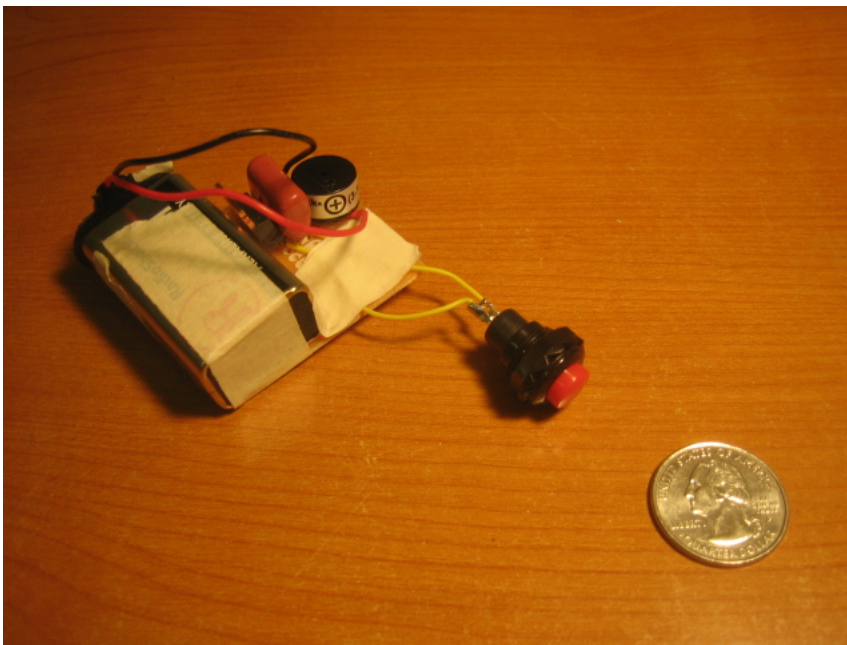


Figure 6.1: A prototype of the *SDD* (quarter shown for size reference).

### 6.1 Synopsis

*SDD* is a simple electronic device: it consists of a capacitor, a transistor, a piezo buzzer, a battery, and a momentary switch. The switch is a fairly large red button.

Participants are instructed not to press the button. If the button is pressed, the device immediately begins to emit a high pitched, uncomfortably loud sound. Once pressed, the sound plays until the circuit is broken, or the battery is removed — and the battery is soldered in, so that it cannot be easily removed.

The piece is intended to be presented in one of two ways: First, it may be deployed in a gallery installation setting. A large number (perhaps 10-20) of the devices are layed out on a table. Visitors to the gallery have the opportunity to pick up the devices and press the button, but posted instructions advise them against it. If they do so, they are responsible for destroying the device. The second way to deploy this piece is to simply hand out the devices to people in a public setting, such as a gallery opening, a performance, or any other public event.

## **6.2 Intentions**

The goal of *SDD* is to create a moral dilemma, in which a disturbing and unpleasant situation is created, but the responsibility for this situation is ambiguous. My hope is that once the button on the device is pressed, participants will be forced to confront the device directly, and make it stop. The buzzer is intended to be loud enough that cessation of sound from it is a very urgent matter — it quickly becomes very uncomfortable. I wanted participants to have a visceral response, in which they feel very compelled to destroy the artwork, despite the aversion they would likely have to destroying things (they may not know that they have permission to destroy the device).

## **6.3 Moral Responsibility: Artist vs. Participant**

Alfred Nobel was a Swedish inventor who lived from 1833-1896. Nobel made a large personal fortune over his invention of dynamite, which he originally touted as “safety blasting powder”, since it was more stable than pure nitro-glycerin. According to the popular lore, Nobel felt so guilty about the use of his invention as an instrument of war (and his fortune resulting from that use) that he was moved to establish the

fund for the Nobel Prize, to be given to the most outstanding minds in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and peace each year.[52] Was it right of Nobel to feel moral responsibility for the use of his invention? After all, he merely created the tool, where it was others who used it to do wrong.

The role of an artist as a presenter inherently creates a large difference in power between the artist and the audience. To varying degrees, the artist controls the experience that audiences will have. In the case of interactive works, audiences have a slightly increased role, but usually the rules and boundaries of the interaction are still controlled by the artist. In pieces such as *Inhibit*, the artist continues to play an active role in the unfolding action of the piece (he sits in the booth controlling the microphones and video). However, in a piece such as *SDD*<sup>1</sup>, the artist merely creates a situation and steps away, allowing the rest of the action to be controlled entirely by the visitor.

Who is responsible, if the execution of an interactive work results in a morally bad or morally questionable situation? In *SDD*, a disruptive and painful noise presents a problem for any person in the room when the button is pressed. Indeed, the participant was warned by a sign not to press the button. However, with a label indicating that the button shouldn't be pressed, pressing the button is the obvious and desirable thing for a curious person to do. Without the situation engineered by the artist, the problem with the loud noise would not have occurred.

Similarly, in other works discussed here, the artists create a scenario where in order to experience the artwork, it is necessary for a viewer to take an action which results in a morally questionable situation. These works are transgressive in that they push the boundaries of peoples' sense of moral security. Their uses of transgression straddle a point between an aesthetic appreciation of transgression (the sense of moral violation) and a political message (questioning the moral implications of the scenario).

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<sup>1</sup>“Social Disruption Device”, or “Sonic Distortion Device”

### 6.3.1 Samson

Chris Burden (previously mentioned for his *Back to You* in 3.4.3) presented an installation in 1985 entitled *Samson*. *Samson* consists of a 100-ton jack connected to the support beams of a museum, and a turnstile connected to it such that gallery visitors who enter increase the tension on the jack.

Each visitor to the exhibition must pass through the turnstile in order to see the exhibition. Each input on the turnstile ever so slightly expands the jack, and ultimately, if enough people visit the exhibition, *Samson* could theoretically destroy the building. Like a glacier its powerful movement is imperceptible to the naked eye. This sculptural installation subverts the notion of the sanctity of the museum (the shed that houses art).[40]

*Samson* creates a difficult situation for the visitor: in order to experience the piece, it is necessary to take an action the visitor would likely not wish to do — namely, contribute to the potential destruction of a gallery. Who is responsible for this destruction? On the one hand, visitors are the cause of each tightening of the jack, and ultimately whether or not the museum is destroyed. On the other hand, without the very specific scenario constructed by the artist, there would never be this danger.

### 6.3.2 Imponderabilia

Marina Abramović (previously mentioned for her *Rhythm 5* and *Rhythm 0* in 3.4.1) performed a piece with Ulay, her longtime partner, entitled *Imponderabilia* in 1977. In the piece, Abramović and Ulay stand in the doorway to a gallery adjacent to each other, such that viewers have to brush against them in order to enter the gallery. Abramović describes the performance:

Naked we stand opposite each other in the museum entrance. The public entering the museum has to turn sideways to move through the limited space between us. Everyone wanting to get past has to choose one of us.[53]

Abramović and Ulay create a situation where visitors are forced to do something they ordinarily wouldn't want to: to brush up against a stranger's naked body. Ordinarily, touching a stranger's naked body is a social taboo, but in the context of a performance piece such as this, visitors will likely feel compelled to enter the gallery, in violation of that taboo.

### 6.3.3 Goldfish Blender

Marco Evaristti presented a controversial installation in 2000 entitled *Goldfish Blender*. The installation consists of 10 blenders, each of which contain a single, living goldfish in water. Visitors are told that they may, if they wish, press the “on” button of a blender and thus pulverize the goldfish. Two goldfish were thusly killed by visitors. Public reaction to Evaristti's installation was very strong — ethical experts argued about its implications<sup>2</sup>, and the artist and gallery were taken to court on cruelty charges. The director of the gallery (the Trapholt Art Museum in Kolding, Denmark) was fined for cruelty to animals after an animal rights group lodged a complaint. After hearing expert testimony from the blenders' manufacturer and a veterinarian, the Danish court ruled in favor of the artist and the gallery, determining that the fish would die instantly and painlessly.[55] Still, the gallery unplugged the remaining blenders so that the fish would not be killed. The installation created a simple situation which resulted in moral (and even legal) furor over the artist, despite the fact that it was the visitors who caused the death of the goldfish (no legal action was ever taken against any of the gallery-goers). The installation raises questions over the responsibility of those who establish situations directly enabling others to do wrong.

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The artist, Marco Evaristti, who placed the goldfish in the blender evidently thinks that goldfish have some ethical status that they cannot be disposed of with indifference. We can see this by understanding the purpose of Evaristti's installation, designed to force people to “do battle with their conscience”. This can only be achieved if you assume goldfish to count for enough to trigger contemplation of one's conscience.[54]

— Simon Longstaff, writing for [www.ethics.org.au](http://www.ethics.org.au)



## 6.4 Evaluation of *SDD*

I consider *SDD* to be my most successful work in this series. While it is as conceptually complex as the other pieces, it does not have nearly as much distracting complexity in implementation. It embodies a simplicity and directness that makes only minimal assumptions about peoples' interactions with it, and very succinctly attacks the moral question inherent in its design. I would like to pursue further artwork in this vein, which asks important social and moral questions through simple and direct means.

# Chapter 7

## Conclusion

Transgressive artwork has the potential of creating experiences unattainable without transgression — not only for works where the transgression is a necessary part of the content, such as G.G. Allin’s tirades or the Yes Men’s antics — but also in works where the coercive or boundary pushing content makes for a new type of connection with the audience. Certainly the transgressive elements of every work discussed here are not the only meaningful or worthwhile components of the works — but without them, the pieces would not have been as effective.

It may be appropriate to ask — in comparison with the works of others discussed in this paper, are my works truly transgressive? It seems that there is a marked difference between a piece which invites participants to pulverize a goldfish in a blender and a piece which merely plays a loud buzzer. In comparison to many of the works discussed here, my works are not as dangerous. I do not fire weapons in peoples’ faces, mutilate bodies, kill animals, hold people against their will, or break the law. Even my uncomfortably loud sounds were not so loud as to be dangerous. At most, the transgression is manifest simply in annoyance — one is faced with annoyingly loud or repetitive sounds, or at worst asked to behave abnormally in public.

By definition, transgressive art must create discomfort, disgust, unpleasantness, or some other displeasure in its audience. The most obviously transgressive art is work which is widely regarded as offensive and wrong, where the audience would say “they shouldn’t do that”. An artist producing this type of work must be willing to

endure not only the usual artistic criticism of his or her work, but also moral criticism attacking him or her as a person for his or her degeneracy in producing such anti-social work. Intentionally transgressive art can be self-defeating: to function at its best, it must be disliked.

My works were completed in an academic setting, for the purpose of fulfilling the requirements of a master's thesis (a thesis in music, nonetheless). This has the potential to create a paradoxical situation: had I the inclination and the courage to produce pieces that were substantially more dangerous and offensive, to the point that the thesis committee found them to be morally inappropriate or reprehensible, could my work have fulfilled the requirements? Would the presence of this theoretical and historical analysis which justifies transgression as a major current in artwork have been a sufficient excuse to produce work that the committee would not only find unappealing, but also dangerous and anti-social?

These questions are largely rhetorical, because my own constitution is not such that I wish to create work that transgresses to that degree. While the extremely transgressive works of others fascinate me, I am happy to make my own work more philosophical than visceral, and for that reason my works have tended to fall on the less dangerous side of transgression. Still, I wonder — how would my thesis defense have proceeded differently if I had brought to it a loaded gun?

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