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But, Is it Art? 2001

Introduction

This is a book about what art is, what it means, and why we value it—a book on topics in the field loosely called art theory. We will scrutinize many different art theories here: ritual theory, formalist theory, imitation theory, expression theory, cognitive theory, postmodern theory—but not in order, one by one. That would be as tedious for me to write as for you to read. A theory is more than a definition; it is a framework that supplies an orderly explanation of observed phenomena. A theory should help things make sense rather than create obscurity through jargon and weighty words. It should systematically unify and organize a set of observations, building from basic principles. But the 'data' of art are so varied that it seems daunting to try to unify and explain them. Many modern artworks challenge us to figure out why, on *any* theory, they would count as art. My strategy here is to highlight the rich diversity of art, in order to convey the difficulty of coming up with suitable theories. Theories have practical consequences, too, guiding us in what we value (or dislike), informing our comprehension, and introducing new generations to our cultural heritage.

A big problem about laying out the data for this book is that our term 'art' might not even apply in many cultures or eras. The practices and roles of artists are amazingly multiple and elusive. Ancient and modern tribal peoples would not distinguish art from artefact or ritual. Medieval European Christians did not make 'art' as such, but tried to emulate and celebrate God's beauty. In classical Japanese aesthetics, art might include things unexpected by modern Westerners, like a garden, sword, calligraphy scroll, or tea ceremony.

Many philosophers from Plato onward have proposed theories of art and aesthetics. We shall scrutinize some of them here, including the medieval colossus Thomas Aquinas, the Enlightenment's key figures David Hume and Immanuel Kant, the notorious iconoclast Friedrich Nietzsche, and such diverse twentieth-century figures as John Dewey, Arthur Danto, Michel Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard. Of course, there are also theorists in other fields who study art: from sociology, art history and criticism, anthropology, psychology, education, and more; I will refer to some of these experts as well.

One group of people with a strong focus on art are members of an association I belong to, the American Society for Aesthetics. At our annual conferences we attend lectures about art and its subfields—film, music,

painting, literature; we also do more fun things, like go to exhibitions and concerts. I have used the programme and topics from one of these conferences, held in 1997 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, as a loose organizing strategy for my chapters below. Santa Fe itself offers a kind of microcosm of the diverse arts issues and intersections I want to consider here. Nestled in the natural beauty of the desert and nearby mountains, the city boasts a surprising array of museums, both historic and modern. It is as renowned for its sleek high-rent (and high-priced) commercial galleries as for the many artisans on the plaza selling their wares at bargain rates. The city illustrates the complex history of today's America, mingling a constant influx of tourists and newcomers with its Spanish colonial heritage, enriched by Native Americans from nearby pueblos, with their marvellous pottery, weavings, fetishes, and kachina dolls.

In approaching our study of art's diversity, I warn you that I have chosen shock tactics, for I will begin in the rather grisly present-day world of art, dominated by works that speak of sex or sacrilege, made with blood, dead animals, or even urine and faeces (Chapter 1). My aim is to defuse the shock a little by linking such work with earlier traditions, to demonstrate that art has not always been about the beauty of the Parthenon or a Botticelli Venus. If you make it through the first

chapter, you will accompany me as we backtrack through art's history (Chapter 2), before circuiting the globe in pursuit of art's diverse manifestations (Chapter 3). Theories will be presented when it seems appropriate, in response to the data we encounter from a variety of cultures and eras.

People in the field of aesthetics do more than try to define what art is. We also want to explain why it is valued, considering how much people pay for it and where art is collected and displayed—for example, museums (Chapter 4). What can we learn by examining where art is exhibited, how, and how much it costs? Art theorists also ponder questions about artists: who are they, and what makes them special? Why do they do the sometimes odd things they do? Recently this has led to intense debate about whether intimate facts concerning artists' lives, such as their gender and sexual orientation, are relevant to their art (Chapter 5).

Among the hardest problems an art theory faces are questions about how to settle art's meaning through interpretation (Chapter 6). We will consider whether an artwork has 'a' meaning, and how theorists have tried to capture or explain it—whether by studying artists' feelings and ideas, their childhood and unconscious desires, or their brains(!). Finally, of course, we all want to know what lies ahead for art in the

twenty-first century. In the age of the Internet, CD-ROM, and World Wide Web (Chapter 7), we can visit museums 'virtually' without the aggravation of crowds (let alone the cost of an air ticket)—but what do we miss when we do that? And what kinds of new art are fostered in the new media?

I hope this overview indicates the range and challenge of the issues that make the study of art so intriguing. It seems that art always has been and always will be important to humans; and the things artists do will probably keep puzzling us as well as providing insights and joy. Let's begin our plunge into art theory.

1

Blood and beauty

A rude awakening at the Aesthetics Society

On one morning at our American Society for Aesthetics conference, a small group of people straggled into a room at 9 a.m., to be jolted awake by slides and videos on 'The Aesthetics of Blood in Contemporary Art'. We saw the blood of Mayan kings and of aboriginal Australian youths at initiation ceremonies. We saw blood poured over statues in Mali and spurting from sacrificial water buffaloes in Borneo. Some of the blood was more recent and closer to home. Buckets of blood drenched performance artists and droplets of blood oozed from the lips of Orlan, who is redesigning herself through plastic surgery to resemble famous beauties in Western art. Something was guaranteed to disgust almost everyone there.

Why has blood been used in so much art? One reason is that it has interesting similarities to paint. Fresh blood

has an eye-catching hue with a glossy sheen. It will stick to a surface, so you can draw or make designs with it (on the skin of the Aborigine youths, its shimmering cross-hatched patterns evoke the archetypal era of the 'Dream Time'). Blood is our human essence—Dracula sucks it up as he creates the undead. Blood can be holy or noble, the sacrificial blood of martyrs or soldiers. Spots of blood on sheets indicate the loss of virginity and passage to adulthood. Blood can also be contaminated and 'dangerous', the blood of syphilis or Aids. Obviously, blood has a host of expressive and symbolic associations.

Blood and ritual

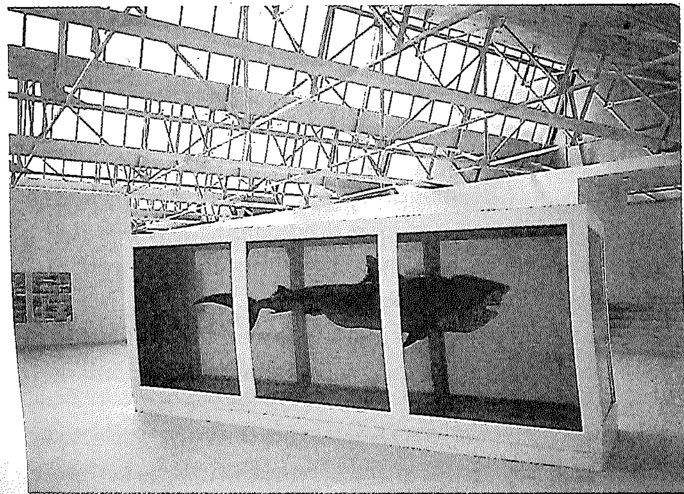
But does blood in kooky modern (urban, industrial, First World) art mean what it does in 'primitive' rituals? Some people advocate a theory of art as ritual: ordinary objects or acts acquire symbolic significance through incorporation into a shared belief system. When the Mayan king shed blood before the multitude in Palenque by piercing his own penis and drawing a thin reed through it three times, he exhibited his shamanistic ability to contact the land of the undead. Some artists seek to recreate a similar sense of art as ritual.

Diamanda Galás fuses operatic wizardry, light shows, and glistening blood in her *Plague Mass*, supposedly to exorcise pain in the era of Aids. Hermann Nitsch, the Viennese founder of the Orgies Mystery Theatre, promises catharsis through a combination of music, painting, wine-pressing, and ceremonial pouring of animal blood and entrails. You can read all about it on his Web site at www.nitsch.org.

Such rituals are not altogether alien to the European tradition: there is a lot of blood in its two primary lineages, the Judaeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman. Jahweh required sacrifices as parts of His covenant with the Hebrews, and Agamemnon, like Abraham, faced a divine command to slit the throat of his own child. The blood of Jesus is so sacred that it is symbolically drunk to this day by believing Christians as promising redemption and eternal life. Western art has always reflected these myths and religious stories: Homeric heroes won godly favour by sacrificing animals, and the Roman tragedies of Lucan and Seneca piled up more body parts than Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Renaissance paintings showed the blood or lopped heads of martyrs; Shakespeare's tragedies typically concluded with swordplay and stabbings.

A theory of art as ritual might seem plausible, since art can involve a gathering guided by certain aims,

producing symbolic value by the use of ceremonies, gestures, and artefacts. Rituals of many world religions involve rich colour, design, and pageantry. But ritual theory does not account for the sometimes strange, intense activities of modern artists, as when a performance artist uses blood. For participants in a ritual, clarity and agreement of purpose are central; the ritual reinforces the community's proper relation to God or nature through gestures that everyone knows and understands. But audiences who see and react to a modern artist do not enter in with shared beliefs and values, or with prior knowledge of what will transpire. Most modern art, in the context of theatre, gallery, or concert hall, lacks the background reinforcement of pervasive community belief that provides meaning in terms of catharsis, sacrifice, or initiation. Far from audiences coming to feel part of a group, sometimes they get shocked and abandon the community. This happened in Minneapolis when performance artist Ron Athey, who is HIV-positive, cut the flesh of a fellow performer on stage and then hung blood-soaked paper towels over the audience, creating a panic. If artists just want to shock the bourgeoisie, it becomes pretty hard to distinguish the latest kind of art that gets written up in *Artforum* from a Marilyn Manson performance that includes Satanic rituals of animal sacrifice on stage.



1 'Young British artist' Damien Hirst won fame with his animals in vitrines, like this huge shark in *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991).

The cynical assessment is that blood in contemporary art does not forge meaningful associations, but promotes entertainment and profit. The art world is a competitive place, and artists need any edge they can get, including shock value. John Dewey pointed out in *Art as Experience*, in 1934, that artists must strive for novelty in response to the market:

> Industry has been mechanized and an artist cannot work mechanically for mass production. . . . Artists find it incumbent . . . to betake themselves to their work as an isolated means of 'self-expression.' In order not to cater to the trend of economic forces, they often feel obliged to exaggerate their separateness to the point of eccentricity.

Damien Hirst, the 'Britpack' artist who sparked controversy in the 1990s by displaying macabre high-tech exhibits of dead sharks, sliced cows, or lambs in vitrines of formaldehyde, has parlayed his notoriety into success with his popular Pharmacy restaurant in London. It is hard to imagine how Hirst's tableaux of rotting meat (complete with maggots) helped his image in the food business—but fame works in mysterious ways.

Some of the most infamous art of recent decades became controversial because of its startling presentation of human bodies and body fluids. At the 1999

Sensation exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the most controversial artwork ('Virgin Mary' by Chris Ofili) even used elephant dung. Controversy erupted about funding of the US National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the late 1980s after bodies were penetrated and exposed, as blood, urine, and semen became newly prominent in art. Images like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) and Robert Mapplethorpe's *Jim and Tom, Sausalito* (1977) (which showed one man urinating into another man's mouth) became key targets for critics of contemporary art.

It is no accident that this controversial work was about religion, as well as body fluids. Symbols of pain and suffering that are central to many religions can be shocking when dislocated from their community. If they mix with more secular symbols, their meaning is threatened. Artwork that uses blood or urine enters into the public sphere without the context of either well-understood ritual significance or artistic redemption through beauty. Probably the critics of modern art are nostalgic for beautiful and uplifting art like the *Sistine Chapel*. There, at least the bloody scenes of martyred saints or torments of sinners at the Last Judgement were wonderfully painted, with a clear moral aim (just as the horrors of ancient tragedy were depicted through inspiring poetry). Similarly, some critics of contemporary

art feel that if a body is to be shown nude, it should resemble Botticelli's *Venus* or Michelangelo's *David*. These critics seemed unable to find either beauty or morality in Serrano's infamous photograph *Piss Christ* (see Plate I). Senator Jesse Helms summed it up, 'I do not know Mr Andres Serrano, and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an artist, he is a jerk.'

Controversies about art and morality are not new, of course. The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) also dealt with hard questions about morality, art, and taste, a key concern of his era. It is likely that Hume would not have approved of blasphemy, immorality, sex, or the use of body fluids as appropriate in art. He felt artists should support Enlightenment values of progress and moral improvement. The writings of Hume and his successor Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) form the basis of modern aesthetic theory, so I turn to them next.

Taste and beauty

The term 'aesthetics' derives from the Greek word for sensation or perception, *aisthesis*. It came into prominence as a label for the study of artistic experience (or sensibility) with Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762).

The Scottish philosopher David Hume did not use this term but spoke of 'taste', a refined ability to perceive quality in an artwork. 'Taste' might seem completely subjective—we all know the saying 'there's no accounting for taste'. Some people have favourite colours and desserts, just as they prefer certain kinds of automobiles or furniture. Isn't art just like this? Perhaps you prefer Dickens and Fassbinder, while I prefer Stephen King and *Austin Powers*; how can you prove that your taste is better than mine? Hume and Kant both struggled with this problem. Both men believed that some works of art really *are* better than others, and that some people have better taste. How could they account for this?

The two philosophers took different approaches. Hume emphasized education and experience: men of taste acquire certain abilities that lead to agreement about which authors and artworks are the best. Such people, he felt, eventually will reach consensus, and in doing so, they set a 'standard of taste' which is universal. These experts can differentiate works of high quality from less good works. Hume said men of taste must 'preserve minds free from prejudice', but thought no one should enjoy immoral attitudes or 'vicious manners' in art (his examples included Muslim and Roman Catholic art marred by over-zealousness). Sceptics now criticize the narrowness of this view, saying

that Hume's taste-arbiters only acquired their values through cultural indoctrination.

Kant too spoke about judgements of *taste* but he was more concerned with explaining judgements of *Beauty*. He aimed to show that good judgements in aesthetics are grounded in features of artworks themselves, not just in us and our preferences. Kant tried to describe our human abilities to perceive and categorize the world around us. There is a complex interplay among our mental faculties including perception, imagination, and intellect or judgement. Kant held that in order to function in the world to achieve our human purposes, we label much of what we sense, often in fairly unconscious ways. For example, we modern Westerners recognize round flat things out in the world, and we categorize some of these as dinner plates. Then we use them to eat our meals. Similarly, we recognize some things as food and others as potential threats or marriage partners.

It is not easy to say how we categorize things like red roses as beautiful. The beauty of the roses is not out there in the world, as the roundness and flatness are in the plates. If it were, then we would not get into so many disagreements of taste. And yet there is *some* sort of basis for claiming that the roses are beautiful. After all, there is quite a lot of human agreement that roses are

beautiful and that cockroaches are ugly. Hume tried to resolve this problem by saying that judgements of taste are 'intersubjective': people with taste tend to agree with each other. Kant believed that judgements of beauty were universal and grounded in the real world, even though they were not actually 'objective'. How could this be?

Kant was a kind of predecessor to modern scientific psychologists who study judgements of beauty by observing infant preferences for faces, tracking viewers' eye movements, or hooking up artists to do magnetic resonance images (MRIs)—see also below in Chapter 6. Kant noted that we typically apply labels or concepts to the world to classify sensory inputs that suit a purpose. For example, when I find a round flat thing in the dishwasher that I recognize as a plate, I put it away in the cupboard with other plates, not in the drawer with spoons. Beautiful objects do not serve ordinary human purposes, as plates and spoons do. A beautiful rose pleases us, but not because we necessarily want to eat it or even pick it for a flower arrangement. Kant's way of recognizing this was to say that something beautiful has 'purposiveness without a purpose'. This curious phrase needs to be further unpacked.

Beauty and disinterestedness

When I perceive the red rose as beautiful, this is not quite like putting it into my mental cupboard of items labelled 'beauty'—nor do I just throw the disgusting cockroach into my mental trash can of 'ugly' items. But features of the object almost force me ('occasion me') to label it as I do. The rose might have its own purpose (to reproduce new roses), but that is not why it is beautiful. Something about its array of colours and textures prompts my mental faculties to feel that the object is 'right.' This rightness is what Kant means by saying that beautiful objects are purposive. We label an object beautiful because it promotes an internal harmony or 'free play' of our mental faculties; we call something 'beautiful' when it elicits this pleasure. When you call a thing beautiful, you thereby assert that everyone ought to agree. Though the label is prompted by a subjective awareness or feeling of pleasure, it supposedly has objective application to the world.

Kant warned that enjoyment of beauty was distinct from other sorts of pleasure. If a ripe strawberry in my garden has a ruby colour, texture, and odour that are so delightful that I pop it into my mouth, then the judgement of beauty has been contaminated. In order to appreciate the beauty of this strawberry, Kant thinks

2 Many people believe art should be beautiful and nudes should be Greek gods and goddesses, like Sandro Botticelli's Venus from *Birth of Venus*.

our response has to be disinterested—independent of its purpose and the pleasurable sensations it brings about. If a viewer responds to Botticelli's *Venus* with an erotic desire, as if she is a pinup, he is actually not appreciating her for her beauty. And if someone enjoys looking at a Gauguin painting of Tahiti while fantasizing about going on vacation there, then they no longer have an aesthetic relation to its beauty.

Kant was a devout Christian, but he did not think God played an explanatory role in theories of art and beauty. To make beautiful art requires human *genius*, the special ability to manipulate materials so that they create a harmony of the faculties causing viewers to respond with distanced enjoyment. (We will look further at an example, Le Nôtre's gardens at Versailles, in the next chapter.) In summary, for Kant the aesthetic is experienced when a sensuous object stimulates our emotions, intellect, and imagination. These faculties are activated in 'free play' rather than in any more focused and studious way. The beautiful object appeals to our senses, but in a cool and detached way. A beautiful object's *form* and design are the key to the all-important feature of 'purposiveness without a purpose'. We respond to the object's rightness of design, which satisfies our imagination and intellect, even though we are not evaluating the object's purpose.

Kant's legacy

Kant developed an account of beauty and of our responses to it. This was not all there was to his theory of art, nor did he insist that all art must be beautiful. But his account of beauty became central to later theories that emphasized the notion of an aesthetic response. Many thinkers held that art should inspire a special and disinterested response of distance and neutrality. Kant's view of beauty had ramifications well into the twentieth century, as critics emphasized the aesthetic in urging audiences to appreciate new and challenging artists like Cézanne, Picasso, and Pollock. Art writers such as Clive Bell (1881–1964), Edward Bullough (1880–1934), and Clement Greenberg (1909–1994) adopted varying views and wrote for different audiences, but they shared attitudes in common with Kant's aesthetics. Bell, for instance, writing in 1914 emphasized 'Significant Form' in art rather than content. 'Significant Form' is a particular combination of lines and colours that stir our aesthetic emotions. A critic can help others see form in art and feel the resulting emotions. These emotions are special and lofty: Bell spoke of art as an exalted encounter with form on Art's 'cold white peaks' and insisted that art should have nothing to do with life or politics.

Bullough, a literature professor at Cambridge, wrote a famous essay in 1912 that described 'psychical distance' as a prerequisite for experiencing art. This was a somewhat updated account of Kant's notion of beauty as the 'free play of imagination'. Bullough argued that sexual or political subjects tend to block aesthetic consciousness:

> ... [E]xplicit references to organic affections, to the material existence of the body, especially to sexual matters, lie normally below the Distance-limit, and can be touched on by Art only with special precautions.

Obviously, the works of Mapplethorpe and Serrano would be the furthest thing from Bullough's mind as candidates for the label of 'Art'.

And Greenberg, who was Pollock's major champion, celebrated form as the quality through which a painting or sculpture refers to its medium and to its own conditions of creation. Seeing what is in a work or what it 'says' is not the point; the astute viewer (with 'taste') is meant to see the work's very flatness or its way of dealing with paint as paint.

There are important rivals to this account of art as Significant Form; I will consider some later in this book. But the views of Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Hume still reverberate today in discussions of quality,

morality, beauty, and form. Art experts testified at the obscenity trial of the Cincinnati gallery that exhibited Mapplethorpe's work that his photographs counted as art because of their exquisite formal properties, such as careful lighting, classical composition, and elegant sculptural shapes. In other words, Mapplethorpe's work fulfilled the 'beauty' expectation required of true art—even nudes with huge penises should be viewed with dispassion as cousins of Michelangelo's *David*.

But how did proponents defend Serrano's *Piss Christ*? This photograph was highly offensive to many people. Serrano has made other difficult photographs as well: his *Morgue* series zeroes in on gruesome dead bodies. Another disturbing image, *Heaven and Hell*, shows a complacent man (actually the artist Leon Golub) dressed in red as a Cardinal of the Church standing beside the nude and bloody torso of a hanging woman. *Cabeza de Vaca* features the decapitated head of a cow that unnervingly seems to peek at the viewer. Taking on the challenge of explaining such work, critic Lucy Lippard wrote about Serrano in *Art in America* in April 1990. We can look at her review to see how an art theorist talks about difficult contemporary art. Because she emphasizes the art's content and Serrano's emotional and political commentary, Lippard represents a

different tradition from the aesthetic formalism of Kant's twentieth-century successors.

Defending Serrano

Lippard's defence of Serrano uses a three-pronged analysis: she examines (1) his work's *formal* and *material* properties; (2) its *content* (the thought or meaning it expresses); and (3) its *context*, or place in the Western art tradition. Each step is important, so let us review them in more detail.

First, Lippard describes how a picture like *Piss Christ* looks and was made. Many people were so disgusted by the title that they could not bear to look at the work; others saw it only in small black and white reproductions. My students thought that the image showed a crucifix in a toilet or in a jar of urine—neither of which is true. The actual photograph looks different from a small image in a magazine or book (like the one reproduced here)—just as aficionados will say that an Ansel Adams original has qualities no reproduction can convey. *Piss Christ* is *huge* for a photograph: 60 by 40 inches (roughly five by three feet). It is a Cibachrome, a colour photograph that is glossy and rich in its colours. This is a difficult medium to work with because the

prints' glassy surfaces are easily ruined by the touch of a fingertip or the slightest speck of dust.

Though the photograph was made using (the artist's own) urine and has 'piss' in its title, the urine is not recognizable as such. The crucifix looks large and mysterious, bathed in golden fluid. Lippard writes:

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

Serrano's title is (no doubt intentionally) jarring. It seems we are meant to be torn between being shocked and musing over an image that is mysterious, perhaps even reverential.

With regard to the artwork's 'material' qualities, Lippard explains that Serrano does not regard body fluids as shameful but as natural. Perhaps his attitude stems from his cultural background: Serrano is a member of a minority group in the United States (he is part Honduran and part Afro-Cuban). Lippard points out

that in Catholicism, bodily suffering and body fluids have been depicted for millennia as sources of religious power and strength. Vials in churches hold fabric, bits of blood, bones, and even skulls that commemorate saints and stories of miracles. Instead of being regarded with panic or horror, these relics are reverenced. Perhaps Serrano grew up with and looks back upon a somewhat more vital kind of encounter with the spiritual in fleshly form than what he sees in the culture around him. The artist wanted to condemn the way that culture pays only lip service to a religion without truly endorsing its values.

It is hard to prevent a discussion of form and materials from spilling over into a discussion of content. We have already begun to take up the second prong of Lippard's article by considering the artist's intended *meaning*. Serrano told Lippard about his religious concerns:

> I'd been doing religious pictures for two or three years before I realized I had done a lot of religious pictures! I had no idea I had this obsession. It's a Latino thing, but it's also a European thing, more so than an American thing.

Serrano claims that his work was not done to denounce religion but its *institutions*—to show how our con-

temporary culture is commercializing and cheapening Christianity and its icons. Lippard supports this by noting that the artist produced a group of similar works in 1988 (*Piss Deities*) showing other famous icons of Western culture afloat in urine, ranging from the Pope to Satan. Analysis of the content or meaning of other disturbing works, such as *Heaven and Hell*, requires the further step of talking about Serrano's *context*.

The third point of Lippard's three-pronged defence of Serrano then goes beyond discussing his work's formal properties or themes to address his inspirations and artistic antecedents. Serrano speaks of his 'strong ties to the Spanish tradition of art, which can be both violent and beautiful', mentioning in particular the painter Francisco Goya and filmmaker Luis Buñuel. This art-historical context is interesting and important, but complicated. I will zero in on just the first of these comparisons and look at Goya's works in more detail, to assess whether Lippard has used a reasonable strategy in linking Serrano's controversial contemporary art to this prominent and respected Spanish predecessor.

Goya—a precursor?

Francisco Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828), a contemporary of both Hume and Kant, was a supporter of modern

democratic values. His lifetime spanned the American and French Revolutions and the terrors of the French and Spanish Peninsular War. His place as a genius in the canon of Western art is secure. Appointed official painter to the King of Spain in 1799, Goya is well known for his images of noblemen in gold-tasselled uniforms and ladies in brilliant satins and silks. He painted familiar Spanish genre scenes like bullfights; but sex and politics were never far from his art. His enticing but controversial *Naked Maja* brought him to the attention of the Spanish Inquisition.

Goya witnessed tumultuous political events when Napoleon's army invaded Spain; he painted many scenes of battles, revolts, and assassinations, such as his famous *The Executions of May 3, 1808*, where innocent civilians are gunned down by an inexorable, faceless row of Napoleon's soldiers. At the centre stands a man, arms outflung in mortal terror a moment before the bullets will hit. Another man lies dead in a pool of blood. Monks hide their faces in horror at the massacre. Some would say this scene of death is not so unusual in Western art. The artist drew on religious imagery of martyred saints to depict new political martyrs.

Goya's art made people confront the dire possibilities of human nature in moments of extreme crisis. In his

Caprichos series he created savage images of moral depravity, scenes set in brothels and caricatures that showed people as chickens and doctors as donkeys. The painter defended his aims (speaking of himself in the third person):

> [C]ensoring human errors and vices—although it seems the preserve of oratory and poetry—may also be a worthy object of painting. As a subject appropriate to his work, he has selected from the multitude of stupidities and errors common to every civil society, and from the ordinary obfuscations and lies condoned by custom, ignorance, or self-interest, those he has deemed most fit to furnish material for ridicule, and at the same time to exercise the author's imagination.

Some would say that Goya's moral perspective differentiates him from a modern artist like Serrano. Whereas (some think) Serrano sought sensationalism or was too ambiguous about the meaning of images like *Piss Christ* and *Heaven and Hell*, Goya's position seems clear and defensible. But this contrast is not so easy to maintain. Since Goya supported the French Revolution, it is assumed he is a creature of the Enlightenment, sharing its values with men like Hume and Kant. But Goya witnessed terrible atrocities, with violence and retaliation on both sides during the invasion of Spain.

He evoked these scenes repeatedly in disturbing works in his series of *Los desastres de la Guerra* (*The Horrors of War*) (1810–1814). Goya makes it plain that there were no moral winners in this war: a French soldier lounges while a peasant hangs, but then a peasant hacks away at a helpless man in uniform. Goya's sketches seem to reject Enlightenment hopes of progress and human improvement and approach moral nihilism in endless gruesome scenes of beheadings, lynchings, spearings, spikings, and more.

Even beyond this political despair, the artist seems to have plunged into bleak hopelessness after a horrific illness left him deaf. His *Black Paintings*, done on walls in a room of his own home, are among the most disturbing in all of art history. *Saturn Devouring One of His Sons* depicts the graphic and bloody dismemberment of a cannibalistic infanticide. Other images, though less bloody and violent, are even more disturbing. His *Colossus* sits huge and menacing upon the land like an enormous Cyclopean monster. *Dog Buried in the Sand* is a pitiful animal overwhelmed by brutal forces of nature, alone and despairing. It is impossible to view these late works of Goya with aesthetic distance. Are they the product of a diseased mind, a sick imagination, a temporary lapse of sanity? It would be sheer dogma to deny that Goya has stopped being a good artist because

3 Francisco Goya's *Saturn* alludes to ancient Greek mythology, in a disturbing image open to both political and personal interpretations.

such works are painful or because their moral point seems obscure.

This brief art historical detour enables us to draw a positive conclusion about Serrano's claim to regard Goya as a forebear whose images combine beauty with great violence. Remember that such a comparison is a part of Lucy Lippard's defence of Serrano's often troubling images. Of course, a detractor might say that Goya is different from Serrano because his artistic ability was greater, and because he depicted violence not to sensationalize it or to shock people but precisely in order to condemn it. Each point has problems. It is going to be hard to compare any twentieth-century artist to a 'Great Master' from the past like Goya. We are not in a position to know the ultimate judgement of history; and not being a Goya does not mean that someone altogether lacks artistic ability. Lippard has argued, reasonably, that Serrano's work exhibits skill, training, thought, and careful preparation.

And second, it is quite possible that Goya is not asserting a morally uplifting message in all his works, but saying instead that human nature is dreadful. A lament can be a legitimate message in art, even when delivered with shocking content that prevents us from maintaining our aesthetic distance. Perhaps Serrano meant to insult established religion, but this could stem from a moral

motivation. When he photographs corpses it may not be to wallow in their decay but to offer anonymous victims some moments of human sympathy. Such an aim would confirm the continuity between him and his distinguished artist predecessor Goya.

Conclusion

Artwork in recent years has incorporated a lot of horror. Photographers have shown corpses or the grisly severed heads of animals, sculptors have displayed rotting meat with maggots, and performance artists have poured out buckets of blood. I could have mentioned other highly successful artists with similar subjects: the tortured bodies of Francis Bacon's paintings (which we will consider in Chapter 6), or the representations of Nazi ovens in Anselm Kiefer's huge dark canvases.

So far I have raised doubts about two theories of art. The theory of art as communal ritual fails to account for the value and effects of much contemporary art. The experience of walking into a spacious, well-lit, and air-conditioned gallery or a modern concert hall may have its own ritualistic aspects, but ones completely unlike those achieved by the sober participants with shared transcendent values at occasions like those I mentioned

at the start of this chapter, such as a Mayan or Australian Aboriginal tribal gathering. It seems unlikely we are seeking to contact the gods and higher reality, or appease spirits of our ancestors.

But neither does recent art seem defensible within an aesthetic theory like Kant's or Hume's that rests upon Beauty, good taste, Significant Form, detached aesthetic emotions, or 'purposiveness without a purpose'. Many critics do praise the beautiful compositions of Mapplethorpe's photographs and the elegant stylization of Hirst's gleaming vitrines with suspended animals inside. But even if they find the work beautiful, its startling content demands consideration. Perhaps disinterestedness has some small role in approaching difficult art by enabling us to try harder to look at and understand something that seems very repugnant. But the work's content is also very crucial, as I think Hirst's titles indicate—he confronts viewers directly with tough issues, as in the shark piece, entitled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*.

By pointing back to works of an important artist from the past, Goya, I have argued that contemporary ugly or shocking art like Serrano's has clear precedents in the Western European canon. Art includes not just works of formal beauty to be enjoyed by people with 'taste', or works with beauty and uplifting moral messages, but

also works that are ugly and disturbing, with a shatteringly negative moral content. How that content is to be interpreted remains a matter for more discussion below.