

## The Ethics of Transgression: Is It Still Possible? by Donald Kuspit

The works in Barbara O'Brien's "Spinning Straw Into Gold" series of exhibitions are transgressive in import, by which I mean that they deal with "the violation of a law, command, or moral code," and as such "offend," even "sin," to quote the dictionary definition of "transgression." To transgress is "to go beyond a limit or boundary imposed" by society, the dictionary adds. The implicit question is whether the transgression is carried out for its own nihilistic sake, that is, whether the violation is meant to destroy or at least discredit the boundary and assert that there are no limits—the result is chaos, as the psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel argues, noting that civilization begins with the setting of limits or marking of boundaries, and that the person who denies and undoes them is a pervert—or whether in going beyond socially defined limits or controlling boundaries one is re-defining, even re-inventing society, so that it is more civilized than it was, that is, less constrictive, the way the binding of the feet of women in China once was. Such binding, inhibiting natural growth and spontaneous movement, is a good symbol for a procrustean world order.

There are those who regard transgression as a means of unbinding the feet so that they can grow and move freely, and those who think the feet are permanently stunted and so must be cut off, binding and all—who think that transgression means violent annihilation of the whole rotten inhumane world order, too set in its ways to be durably changed for the better. For them, it is better to lose everything, as though to make a completely new beginning; but they never do. Their real wish is to anarchistically obliterate all boundaries—to be completely unbound, however impossible that seems to

be, and also strangely limiting and insidiously dehumanizing--rather than to create new boundaries, functioning as flexible guidelines rather than absolutely binding. The maintaining of boundaries—the acceptance of limits—is necessary for humanizing growth, but if the boundaries are rigid and ruthlessly enforced rather than malleable limits of self-formation and self-containment, and thus basic to self-control, they stop growth in its tracks. Thus transgression is either an act of nihilistic defiance—a sort of insane, impulsive, barbaric storming the barricades of social boundaries in a delusion of personal (and one might add artistic) grandeur--or a revolutionary act of transcendence for the sake of a vision of a more sanely organized and thus more civilized and human society, that is, a society with less constrictive fixed boundaries, but still with limits that organize and shape the relations between its members. Indeed, without such differentiating boundaries they would have no significant relationships: boundlessness means rampant naïve narcissism.

I will argue that Chantal Zakari's "Transgression" reveals the disappearance of socializing and humanizing boundaries, that is, the obliteration of differentiation between public and private, and between the sexes, and the emotional chaos and pseudo-intimacy that appears in virtual relationships, indicative of the perverse regression to narcissism typical of cyber-society and cyber-representation. In contrast, I will argue that Tiffany Ludwig's and Renee Piechocki's "Trappings: Stories of Women, Power and Clothing" show that transgressing well-established boundaries can be socially revolutionary, that is, establish new possibilities of social and personal identity and authentic relationship. I think Rachel Dayson-Levy's and Deborah Bohnert's works, grouped together as "Lush" by Barbara O'Brien, playfully mock boundaries rather than annihilate or transcend them.

They convey a certain discontent with limits tempered by humor, one of the mature defenses, as psychoanalysts think.

But the larger question raised by “Spinning Straw Into Gold” is whether transgression has the provocative punch it had in its avant-garde heyday, or whether, as I think, it has become a familiar, even fashionable way for art to declare its avant-garde credentials. It has become a standard horizon of artistic expectation, to refer to a key concept in Hans-Georg Jauss’s aesthetics of reception, and thus is no longer disturbing to the society it targets or the individual who gets in its way. It is at most a minor impingement, at worst entertainment. Artistic transgression has lost its critical impact, whatever its critical import. History shows that every fresh, new, unexpected and thus “unthinkable” intention or urge that was surprisingly or shockingly anti-conformist when it first became evident in and through art is inevitably domesticated into comfortable cultural conformity. (One might note that such an urge would not manifest itself in art if it was not already present in life. Only when unconscious pressure builds to the point where it threatens the integrity of the psyche as a whole, and compliance to society comes into conflict with self-actualization, however much some compliance is necessary for self-actualization, and for that matter the creativity that informs it, does the urge to transgress become a full-fledged intention, that is, externalize, publicize, socialize, and become conscious of itself in and through art.) But the point I want to make in this talk is that, regardless of whether I am right or wrong about the cultural fate of the transgressive urge, however emotionally strong, and however necessary it may be to counteract over-compliance, and thus important for the over-all health of society as well as the psychic survival and integrity of the individual, transgression is inherently ethical in import.

Thus Barbara O'Brien's insistence that "the viewer...consider the frame of ethics" when viewing the works of art in "Spinning Straw Into Gold" makes good sense, however overfamiliar the trendy "advanced" transgressive look, and transgressive content, of the works may be. Advanced or avant-garde art has become another period style, category, and convention of art history, which suggests that it doesn't add much to our understanding of the "Spinning Straw Into Gold" works whether one classifies them as late avant-garde or neo-avant-garde. In general, I think that putting works of art in historical place tells us very little about their meaning and purpose. Examining the works in the "Spinning Straw Into Gold" exhibitions for their ethical meaning and purpose focuses our attention on their universal human consequence, thus saving them from their own particularity and topicality, and from the historical over-objectification that inevitably overtakes all sociocultural productions.

Barbara has given me some idea about what she means by "ethical." My own is different, but before I present it as a context for understanding what I call the paradoxical ethical quality of the "Spinning Straw Into Gold" works, I would like to offer a brief description of them, with an eye to making their transgressive content explicit.

Zakari's works seem to indulge in the aesthetics of splendor, as though in response to the self-indulgence of the human beings pictured. Information is presented with a certain baroque flamboyance in the photo-enlargements of the video scenarios that are her source material. The extravagance of her method of display is dialectically at odds with the commonplaceness of her subject matter, even in its sexual explicitness. She shows us a lifeworld in which repressive desublimation prevails, to use Herbert Marcuse's influential concept, that is, a world in which the sexualized body is

shamelessly explicit but has lost human meaning. Indeed, the more shamelessly and exclusively sexual the body becomes—the more it is desublimated into a sexual instrument—the less psychically available it is to symbolize the self, as the body did in ancient art. Its sublime or ideal appearance—its representation of what psychoanalysts call the ego ideal—suggests as much. The self is in effect repressed—I would say denied, which is a psychotic rather than standard neurotic defense in a situation of psychic conflict—by sexualizing desublimation of the body. The trade-off of self for sex—the repression and finally total denial of self for the sake of supposedly consummate sexual pleasure—is the basic trade-off of pornography.

Zakari seems to be suggesting that it is also the problem of our society: there is more interest in sex than ideals in our society—more particularly, in having sexual experience than in become ideal selves, or at least selves with character, that is, selves who remain true to an ideal through experiential thick and thin, using it as a guiding beacon however unreachable it may be. I am arguing that Zakari is transgressing by suggesting the pathological character of pornographic chat room sex and desublimated relationships, and perhaps above all of narcissistic exhibitionism, an objectification of the body that precludes the development of the self, more particularly, a sense of oneself as a private subject rather than a public sex object. There is no need to be a Peeping Tom these days, since all is eagerly revealed, even though the revealed body does not have the beauty—the ideality—serious Peeping Toms are looking for.

Ludwig's and Piechocki's works look like forthright, matter-of-fact snapshots, however enlarged to monumentalize the women photographed, thus announcing their power, but nonetheless with the peculiar aura of indifference that such photographs have,

except, no doubt for the individuals photographed, sometimes posing in obvious displays of power. For me the works do not have the aesthetic resonance or flair that Zakari's do, and no doubt they are meant to be anti-aesthetic, as though to make their ideological meaning unequivocally clear. The dialectic of the works exists in the tension between the male-identified uniforms and the fact that they are worn by females, thus giving them a male identity even as it suggests that uniforms are not inherently male or female. Ludwig and Piechoki attack social coding even as they maintain the uniform as a symbol of social authority and power. One might say that Ludwig and Piechocki do not only give women social power, but socially authorize them.

I think Zakari shows stereotypical socio-sexual boundaries in the process of collapsing. This process is implicit in the aesthetics of her technology, as the partial digital obliteration of some of her faces and figures suggests, and in the constructivist character of some of her blow-ups. Both convey the perverse innocence that is the consequence of the meaninglessness of the "unbounded" relationships and sexuality of the chat room scenarios. In contrast, Ludwig and Piechocki set up a contradiction between stereotypical socio-sexual boundaries without suggesting their self-subversion, as it were, as Zakari does. Both are transgressive in principle, Zakari more radically than Ludwig and Piechocki, for Zakari conveys the lack of boundaries, while Ludwig and Piechocki show that they still exist, however problematic.

In both cases the textualization of the images gives them outreach even as it confines them to a narrow, preordained, even procrustean social space. Their visual impact is shortcircuited—even cancelled--by making them discursively commonplace. That is, entering the symbolic order in the form of language they lose visual consequence,

and with that become less imprintable in emotional memory. I am saying that the more they exist and communicate in transient situations, such as in installations on public transportation, the less evocative and staying power they have. No longer visually concentrated and intact, suggesting their intrinsic value, but existing as part of the passing scene of the information society, they lose their spellbinding place—peculiarly hallucinatory character in the case of Zakari’s imagery—in inner life. This happens to be my way of rationalizing my reluctance to stand still long enough to read sometimes lengthy texts that distract from and seem to outperform the imagery, all the more so in public situations, where they seem to impinge on consciousness, and even in galleries, where they typically demand more attention than the images. One readily goes back to the images, even when the exhibition is lopsidedly and demandingly textual, but one doesn’t want to go back to the texts, which are often laboriously didactic and self-important. No doubt this is my own peculiar hang-up about information art, especially when the verbally given information is less resonant and moving, in both senses of the word, than the imagery, which is more likely to transcend its own informational character.

Finally, the works of Dayson-Levy and Bohnert, however different, have the same whimsical, ironically lyric, quasi-clever-childmade look, and in the case of Bohnert a sort of ironical erotic sumptuousness, in the case of Dayson-Levy mischievous eroticism presented with feminist irony. The light touch of both artists, and the perverse character of many of Bohnert’s whimsically aestheticized found objects—some seem suggestive of body parts--and their boundary-defying juxtaposition with equally whimsical mock-esthetic paintings, along with the decorative mix of animal, vegetable and human in

Dayson-Levy's mock gardens of paradise, with the amusing hint of perverse sexual behavior in several of them, add to the ironical flavor of the works. It is their capricious irony that conveys their transgressiveness, even as the capriciousness softens the irony, suggesting a transgressive urge that is not ready to go all the violent way, although whimsy does loosen and relax boundaries.

Now what does all this have to do with ethics, at least as I want to define it? How is it possible to see the "Spinning Straw Into Gold" works in an ethical light, especially the humanistic ethics of Erich Fromm, which is the most convincing kind of ethics I know of? "Its object is not this or that specialized performance," Fromm writes, "but the performance of living, the process of developing into that which one is potentially. In the art of living *man is both artist and the object of his art.*" Rainer Funk notes that Fromm's "system of ethics" differs from "authoritarian ethics," in which the "norm-giver" gains authority by way of the individual's "feeling of weakness and dependence"; from "relativistic ethic[s]," in which there are no objective norms based "on reason and power"; and "biologically immanent ethics," which "does not seriously consider that there are specifically human capacities that can modify natural givens." For Fromm, "*ethics* is used properly to refer to the one universal ethics that is applied to specific human situations, and without which all 'ethics' degenerates into mere behavioral codes because their norms are not governed by the totality of man and what is appropriate to man. A further constitutive element of ethics is that it is rooted in man as a particular orientation."(2)

What, then, is the ethical point of the "Spinning Straw Into Gold" art? How can the transgressive urge it embodies be understood as ethical? How can an ethical

character be attributed to the works? I think the “Spinning Straw Into Gold” works call paradoxical attention to the failure of man to take himself seriously and to live seriously—to be his own object and to live according to the “specifically human qualities of reason and love,” thus “regressing to a prehuman form of existence.”(2) I think this is the basic ethical task of feminist art—and all the artists are feminists, by which I mean they critique maleness and male-oriented society, whether obliquely, as in the case of Zakari, where the sexual paradise of the chat room is implicitly male-oriented, and directly, as in the case of Ludwig and Piechocki, and also Boynert and Dayson-Levy, where the decorative lifeworld is explicitly feminine and female-oriented.

Also, the virtual sex pictured in Zakari’s work is prehuman because it is not based on reason and love, and the lifeworld Boynert and Dayson-Levy construct is prehuman to the extent that the human and nonhuman almost seamlessly merge in it. The humanness of the women pictured by Ludwig and Piechocki is supposedly completed by their identification with male authority and power, but that suggests that it is an abortive humanness, for authority and power, male or female, are the enemies of reason and love. Men’s pursuit of authority and power, sometimes at the expense of everything else in life, is their ethical failure, and women’s eagerness to appropriate male authority and power shows their ethical naivete. I am suggesting that all the works in the “Spinning Straw Into Gold” exhibitions transgress male-imposed boundaries to remind us, however unconsciously, of the ethical shortcomings of human beings in general, however more self-evident in men. I again emphasize that all the artists who spin social straw into artistic gold are female and, implicitly or explicitly, feminist. I leave you with the question whether the feminist transgression of male norms is humanizing—and, for that

matter, whether virtual sex and living in virtual reality, imply dehumanizing transgression of actual sex and actual life—and as such undertaken because of reasoned love for man, or narcissistically aggrandizing and thus as emotionally stultifying as the male pursuit of power and authority.

#### Notes

(1)Rainer Funk, *Erich Fromm: The Courage to Be Human* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 130-32 in passim

(2)Ibid. 139

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