



Mike Kelley  
Manipulated Mass-Produced Idealized Object  
1990  
Black and white photograph  
14 x 11 inches  
35.6 x 27.9 cm

Mike Kelley is an artist whose work undoubtedly displays transcendence of law. Stating that there is no transgression without the law, and vice versa, Kelley posits that law presupposes transgression; thus lawbreaking becomes the inevitable. Consequently, it could be articulated that, through his works on transgression, Kelley is suggestive of laws being meant to be broken. In an interview with Ralph Rugoff, Kelley proudly exclaimed 'I'm of the generation of artists for whom there was an extreme reaction against... clichéd ideas of self-expression, including the notion that the handmade art object revealed a personal, expressive psychology.' Yet, during the same interview, when discussing how one knows if something is a quality work, Kelley declared that this concept can only be understood within the framework of the classificatory system announced, further stating 'pleasure comes from bouncing off those things and categories'. Innately, this provides insight to Kelley's stance on transgressional art being understood as successful art, but also eludes to an indefinite interpretation of this precise success as the sole definition.

This piece is recognised as one of Mike Kelley's 'transgressional' pieces. Kelley maintains that artworks become transgressional when 'they lie outside what had been deemed proper...aesthetics'. The reason I chose this particular work was because I feel as though he has somewhat undermined his own theory through creating a transgressive work by simply depicting what can, within seconds of being viewed, be defined as a disturbing image. As a result, Kelley submits to the concept of aesthetics being the most important aspect of artworks when considering the ability to get one's point across.

I think Kelley's position is much better understood within the context of his piece "Pay for your Pleasure"



Pay for Your Pleasure (1988) was an installation consisting of three parts. The first part was two rows, lining a corridor, of painted portraits of famous people differing in professions (including Oscar Wilde, poet; Piet Mondrian, artist; P. J. Proudhon; philosopher), coupled with a quotation hinting at a connection between artworks and criminality said by each individual. Secondly was a painting of a clown by mass murderer John Wayne Gacy of Chicago, where this installation was set. Finally, a few money collection containers labelled with different local victims' rights organisations.

Acknowledging human potential for transgression regarding this specific postulation of law-breaking exposes the prospective enquiry of artworks in a context where transgression is already assumed, like with criminals. Subsequently, further progression for art can be anticipated due to the recognition of transgression as the basis for introduction to art as opposed to being the desired outcome.

As a result, it might be said that true transgressive works have a broader creative potential than initially stipulated. They are now free to conflict and condemn their own previous behaviours, transformed from being simply abominable images or objects into what could be the beginning of a more comprehensive understanding of how art can engage with transgression positively.

Considering the artist as liberated from the ordinary constraints of law and judgment, artworks enter a defiance of what is considered as socially acceptable, directly comparable to how criminals defy laws. Addressing things otherwise repressed through art is a tool utilised in a therapeutic context. Thus, the creative potential of transgression becomes a concept unfettered by obligation to be abject.

Through acknowledging works to be transgressive, we simultaneously uncover the entrenched attitude of art having value beyond simply aesthetics, encouraging the redemptive purposes of art to be recognised. As Nietzsche claimed, 'we possess art lest we perish from the truth', opening up a foundation of understanding about art's ability to both perform escapism from reality, but, perhaps more potently, to address it; providing a remedy against truth. The discussed works reveal how societal oppression of truth augments the horror of reality, and provide insight to how transgression can be potentially better understood within the context of art. Thus, bringing the question "What if transgressional art was defined not solely as the purposive violation of conventions for the sake of it, but as the intentional provocation of quandary in order to question transgressions in a therapeutic context?"