Great Deeds Against Goya

In 2001 the British artistic duo of Jake (1966 -) and Dinos (1962 -) Chapman purchased a mint condition set of the 1937 edition of Francisco Jose’ de Goya y Lucientes’ (1746-1828) *The Disasters of War* etchings printed directly from the artist's plates. In terms of print quality and historical significance this is a treasure. The Chapmans ruminated over the prints for some years before they began the process of ‘rectifying’ the series by directly painting and drawing on the prints, covering the faces of the victims with clown and puppy heads. This act of scarring created a sensation when the *Insult to Injury* series was presented as part of the *Rape of Creativity* installation of 2003. The critics were vocal in their condemnation, for the Chapmans had effectively committed an act of transgression against the highly regarded works of Goya, his ideals, and by extension against the artist himself. They broke an unspoken and unwritten ‘taboo’ within the parameters of art creation (fig. 1).

The ethical question regarding the destruction of an original work of art by another artist in order to make a new statement is one without a concrete answer. There are no written laws defining the parameters of art-making, no ‘Ten Commandments’ by which artists are expected to ethically adhere. When examples of transgressive behavior in the arts come to light there is often condemnation, derision and criticism, but rarely is punitive action taken. Throughout this dissertation, we will explore the writings of author Anthony Julius to examine the manner in which the *Insult to Injury* series constitutes an act of artistic transgression, and a specific defense used to justify the deed. In order to comprehend the Chapmans’ work it is necessary to understand the contextual meaning of the term ‘transgression’ and its use art history.
‘Transgression’ has its origin in a theological use of the word: to sin, to commit an offense against God. By the 16th century, the word had evolved to describe the breaking of secular law, and quickly grew to include many of the regulations and ‘unspoken’ taboos of society which govern civic behavior. Concurrent with this development, an additional meaning found its way into the cultural vernacular to connote an offense against a person. It loses its rule-breaking status and becomes an act of aggression; an aggravation or insult that causes injury in a verbal, mental, and occasionally physical manner. A further evolution of the term implies the breach of established boundaries; to promote insubordinate ideas and institutions over the accepted hierarchal order of things.

The present use of ‘transgression’ retains much of the meaning described above, but as Julius states in his book *Transgressions: The Offenses of Art*, it takes on a special designation when used in the language of art and art-making:

But the concept of ‘transgressive’ lives its real life in contemporary cultural discourse, where it is highly regarded and much deployed. To describe an artwork as ‘transgressive’ is to offer it a compliment…It is a successor to the Romantic ideology of the artist as genius, a rule-breaker indifferent to art’s constraints…Boundaries are to be deprecated; they resonate with everything that is petrified, stale, encrusted, immobile. Boundary-breaking is to be admired; it resonates with everything that is fluid, fresh, unencumbered, mobile—and ‘cool’…When a boundary is transgressed, one tastes the infinite. (19-20)

Unencumbered by the traditions of art-making and indifferent to the critical reception offered with each new work, the Chapmans seemingly revel in their role as the reigning *enfants terribles* of the contemporary British art scene.

By defacing *The Disasters of War* prints, the brothers have technically committed no crime under the law. They legally purchased a set of the prints on the open art market and are free to do with them as they wish. However, the act of disfigurement performed by the Chapmans flies in the face of the unspoken rule which respects a work of art as a physical legacy
of the artist’s vision. The Chapmans have “…done this because it is something that is not done—
that is naughty”, to quote Paul Bond from his critical analysis of the Insult to Injury series.

Art becomes sacrosanct; it becomes a thing which must be preserved in its original state
and within the pedigree of art history. To understand the transgressive nature of the Chapmans’
behavior, we must examine the breaking of ethical beliefs—specifically what Julius defines as
the breach of taboos, an act to which the brothers are acutely suited.

Taboo-breaking artists do not concern themselves with attacks on the art canon; instead,
they specifically target the viewing audience to challenge what Julius calls “…certain under-
articulated or unspoken sentiments and beliefs to which their audiences may be taken to
adhere…[Artists] violate the taboos in order to violate their audience” (111). Certainly the
Chapman’s oeuvre of work spotlights this conviction. One need only scrutinize any singular
work or grouped installation the Chapmans offer the viewing public to create a list of
desecrations against commonly held convictions (fig. 2).

Unlike established rules of law used to regulate a society, taboos are more difficult to
define. They are experienced in a less systematized fashion than prescribed ways of learning, and
tend to be related to cultural identity—often reflecting the ethical beliefs of entire societies.
Taboos are instinctive and inconsistent; entrenched as they are in custom and religious beliefs,
they police aspects of our lives outside of the moral spectrum. How a civilization treats its
elderly, its interaction with animals or its attitude towards the dead are indications of categorical
boundaries to be respected. The transgressive artists seek to blur and disrupt these types of
boundaries.

Transgressions do not attempt to eradicate rules or taboos, but rather to defer them for
limited amounts of time. Explaining this concept as a component of the philosophies of French
writer Georges Bataille (1897-1962), Julius paraphrases the philosopher’s thoughts on
transgression and taboos: “For Bataille, the transgressor reinscribes the border he violates. Taboos are constraints that must be violated and preserved. Transgression asserts limits. Transgressions suspend taboos without suppressing them” (23). If those borders are eradicated, then new limits must be created in order for transgressive behavior to exist. If they are not renewed, there are no limits against which one may measure and all falls into chaos.

The Chapmans are quite aware of the delicate line between the transgressing of taboos and their outright destruction. In an interview conducted by Nicolas Niarchos in December of 2009, Dinos Chapman addresses this very concept:

…The shock and the discomfort and the protestations of the audience is theatrical, in as much as the work is theatrical. It’s like a dance, really, this very subtle dance going on between the viewer and the artist. We all know there is a line beyond which you don’t cross, because it stops becoming art or becomes genuinely what it is pretending to be.

Q: What is that line?

Dinos Chapman: I think it’s…we’re not interested in breaking the boundaries, the boundaries are there for a reason. There’s a stand-off between culture and everything else. You kind of touch those boundaries, and you go ‘I know where those boundaries are, and I’m going to push them a little bit, see where there is a little bit of play’…(In Your Face: Interview with Dinos Chapman)

While Dinos’ strength of convictions is to be admired, the results of their artistic endeavor do not successfully translate and reveal an immature understanding of The Disasters of War prints.

Goya took aim at the romanticized view of war, breaking the conventional taboos of heroic representation in an effort to morally educate his audience about the ugly realities of war-making and its consequences. By rejecting the accepted practice of presenting war in an idealized fashion and focusing instead on the horrific atrocities committed by both sides in the Peninsular War, Goya performed a ‘one-two punch’ of transgressions. The visualization of broken and dismembered bodies, of rape, murder and the desperate plight of the innocents caught between warring factions is both an appellation and assault on the senses of the spectator. He
appeals to the reason and virtue of his audience to share his disgust with these war crimes, yet also attempts to shock the audience out of complacency by breaking the taboos regulating the respectful treatment of dead bodies. The audience is repulsed at the dismemberment of corpses, further exacerbated not only by the act of mutilation, but by the depiction of this carnage for public inspection. The dead are no longer allowed the peace of death, but have become subject for a moral plea of enlightened thinking, a supplication to the ethical standards of civilized society (fig. 3).

The Chapman brothers offer no such appeals of morality with the *Insult to Injury* series. The addition of caricatured clown faces and puppy heads over the faces of the victims in Goya’s prints trivializes the outrage at the atrocities of war, replacing it with a celebration of the violence alone, an excuse to commit a frontal assault on the viewer. Whereas Goya reaches out to the viewer to share his sense of moral repugnance, the Chapmans revel in the very act of disgust, taking great pleasure in confronting the viewer with images of abhorrent violence for its own sake, devoid of any moral explanation or ethical responsibility (fig. 4).

The confrontational approach enlisted by the Chapmans managed to offend much of the critical reception to the *Insult to Injury* series, yet nevertheless has its supporters. How do advocates validate these questionable acts of deformity upon the Goya prints? Julius finds a pattern consisting of three defenses which have been used in the arguments of transgressive art throughout the Modern and Post-Modern period: the estrangement defense, the formalist defense and the canonic defense. These arguments are of a cyclical nature; by offering justification the transgressive artist and his or her allies will attempt to protect art which may be scorned or censored, as well as perform the function of advocacy and explanation. Contemporary artists seek to create art that enlists these defenses; the defenses therefore bring new works into creation that then relies on them for protection (31-33).
The most important of the transgressive art defenses—the estrangement defense—is especially applicable in that the Chapman brothers and their promoters rely heavily on this defense, not only in regards to the *Insult to Injury* series, but also to the brothers’ entire body of work.\(^1\) The estrangement defense can be plainly stated that art teaches a lesson. Julius expands on this characterization observing:

This defense insists that artworks exist to shock us into grasping some truth about ourselves, or about the world, or about art itself…it endorses an art that shatters illusions, exposes prejudices, suspends received wisdom…It estranges us from the familiar; it denies us the pleasure of easy recognition. This is an art that takes received beliefs and exposes them as wishful thinking. (32)

Artworks of this nature have an overriding mission to shock the viewer; to do so is to coerce the audience out of its complacencies and conventions. The *Insult to Injury* series attempts this by attacking the comfortable, time-tested beliefs surrounding Goya and his connection to the Enlightenment.

Goya is considered to be one of the earliest and most successful proponents of the Enlightenment as represented through the visual arts. The Age of Reason sought to realize a world-view based on the gathering of empirical evidence and close observation—the hard sciences—rather than relying on divine revelation. It was this commitment to a humanist way of thinking that led to Goya’s dedicated and unflinching visual expose’ against the romanticized manner in which war was depicted. In addition to the unmasking of severe violence, *The Disasters of War* series also reveals the moral struggle experienced by Goya toward his beloved Spain. The prints provide an enlightened disparagement of superstitious beliefs, a condemnation against an unequal legal system, and an ethically corrupt Catholic Church with hopes of enlisting public derision and a move to action.
The *Insult to Injury* series (and the other Goya-based works) exists primarily to refute this belief. What is offered up in substitution can best be described as a cynical accusation of hypocrisy leveled at the Enlightenment and Goya personally. From the *In Your Face Interview* of 2009, Dinos Chapman offers further insight into Goya and the Enlightenment:

I think his relationship to the Enlightenment is very questionable. I think the interesting thing about Goya is that he straddles the pre-Enlightened, dark Spain, and the Enlightened France. I think that reading his work as the work of an enlightened or someone who is interested in enlightenment; it's pushing the point a little. We've been accused of kind of hijacking Goya, and I think it's no worse than the idea that he's in any way interested in the Enlightenment. You have to look at his work to actually see that it's actually nowhere near as clear as that reading of the work. And also I think the Enlightenment has a goal, and I don’t think we have a goal. I mean our goal is to kind of question rather than to give any answers. And I think the Enlightenment has a logical progression that we are not particularly interested in.

By vandalizing the work of Goya and verbally maligning his intentions, the brothers offer shock tactics to disrupt and infuriate the viewer. What is considered a reverential and ethical series of prints in both thought and execution is upended and scattered. Based on the work and interviews one can infer that for the Chapmans the Enlightenment was an elaborate sham; Goya’s honest commitment to an enlightened-based consciousness regarding the horrors of war really only boils down to a warped implication of the masochistic pleasure he experienced in creating the plates.

The estrangement defense states that this destruction of conventions may lead to new truths, new teachable moments which may potentially transform and advance the art canon. The truth offered by the brothers is nebulous at best; Dinos states quite plainly that the brothers have no conceptual goal, no greater meaning to their art. If there is a truth to be promoted it is undefined and the viewer is left with an empty substitute. Critic Philip Shaw attempts to fill this void in his review for *Art History* in 2003, presenting a well-crafted reading of the *Insult to Injury* series:
Dinos and Jake Chapman, like many of their generation, regard Goya as a strong precursor of ‘new neurotic realism’, a radical nihilist for whom the affirmation remains, at best, a symptom of civilized fallibility, at worst a manifestation of mass, psychotic breakdown. What the Chapmans ‘affirm’ therefore, with their ‘infection’ of Goya, is the failure point of civilized, democratic society…To revivify the disturbance of this indigestible core, which is the abject by any other name, one must reposition Goya’s images outside the humanist framework; we must, in effect, repeat Los Desastres de la Guerra in another form so as to reactivate their critical difference. (479)

While this interpretation of the series is to be commended, it does not offer a rationalization for the Chapmans’ defacement of Goya’s original artwork. This begs the question: Can the same statement be made, and with equal conviction, if the Chapmans had only reworked facsimiles of Goya’s prints? As a practicing artist, I believe the answer to be ‘yes’, and that ultimately the brothers’ primary intent is to aggressively offend the viewing audience, regardless of the meaning attached to the work. It is my conclusion that the Insult to Injury series, as a physical act of artistic desecration, can and should be considered an unethical practice.

We have spent much time exploring the philosophical and critical arguments on matters pertaining to art and ethics, but there is another voice to be taken into consideration. I believe those actively engaged in generating art should be offered the opportunity to weigh in on this ethical question. Whether assuming the role of transgressor or victim, the practicing contemporary artist takes on the mantle of arbiter for present-day ethical decisions made in regards to the integrity of original works of art.

An online survey posted on March 30, 2012 consisted of nine rhetorical questions related to the root ethical question of this presentation (fig. 5). Over 115 artists from the United States and Europe were asked to participate in this survey, all of whom represent a broad range of disciplines within the fine arts, the graphic and industrial artists, as well as the fields of illustration and photography. As of this writing, 54 artists have responded to the survey and have
offered an interesting snapshot of what is considered ethical conduct regarding the treatment of original artwork at the hands of another.²

Viewing the survey as a whole, it can be summarized that the majority of respondents believe the destruction of an original piece of art to create a new statement constitutes an unethical practice. By an equally large percentage they oppose the defacement of their own work, and would not commit a transgressive act upon the works of another artist. Most telling are the results regarding the question of the justification surrounding the Insult to Injury series: Ninety-nine percent of respondents believe the Chapmans’ manipulation of Goya’s art represents an act of publicity-seeking sensationalism. Yet the results are not as decisive as the data suggests. At the end of the survey respondents were given the opportunity to comment on the ethical questions. The following sample of quotations reveals the difficulty in determining acceptable ethical behavior:

“To deface another's created work is insulting and inappropriate. I personally feel the Chapmans in this example could have made their statement by other means and without the expense to Goya's work as directly as they made it. Likewise, I believe that it is the poor state of our global culture that allows this type of behavior and supports it in lieu of more original, constructive, and/or creative means to make such a statement.”

“Dependent upon the reaction of the original artist after asking. This exchange could potentially add to, or alter the intended statement. Prints are kind of like old school photocopies so I don’t feel like what Jake and Dinos Chapman did was as bad as if they ruined a painting.”

“I don't think it's right or ethical to destroy original pieces without the artist's permission, however in isolation it can be argued that new and important art can be created from altering existing works… sometimes changing existing work can create a progression, sometimes it does indeed act as an insult. The concept isn't a particularly pleasing one to me, but it’s the price one sometimes pays for freedom.”

As is to be expected when immersed in the study of ethical behavior, the comments vacillate between clear divisions of black and white and unstable shades of grey.
We have endeavored to place the *Insult to Injury* series within the context of transgressive rule-breaking and to explain an important defense used for its justification, as well as examining the opinions of critics and contemporary artists alike. But we are no closer to realizing a concrete answer to the original question: Is it ethical for an artist or group of artists to vandalize another artist’s work to effect a new statement? Based on the arguments presented within the scope of this dissertation, the answer would appear to be that the marring of *The Disasters of War* prints is an ethical transgression meeting with wide disapproval.

I am reminded of Simon Blackburn’s introductory description of an ethical environment as one which “…determines what we find acceptable or unacceptable, admirable or contemptible…It gives us our standards—our standards of behaviour” (1). It is our collective values as a society which gauges our ethical conduct with respect to the integrity of original works of art. If the example set by the Chapman brothers becomes a culturally sanctioned practice, then they and their ilk will take control of the art dialogue, derailing the narrative of art history. We as a society will have failed to live up to the promise of the Enlightenment for which Goya so passionately championed.
NOTES

1. Theoretical aspects of both the formalist and canonic defenses can be applied to the Insult to Injury series, but offer the least relevance to this thesis. For a detailed explanation of the formalist defense, see Julius 36-42; for the canonic defense, see 42-48.

2. To view the original survey as it appeared online, please go to:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdJBP3rqYGsD_tH8R7OntVNySiTiKwJhsK3NjJJwzVSUG85Q/viewform?formkey=dFgyaEhJT3YzdWc4SkZHaGUxQTY2NGc6MQ
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Art and Transgression
Questions to be Considered

- Is it ethical for an artist (or artists) to physically alter (and in some cases destroy) the work of another artist in order to create a new work?

- Does the statement made justify the defacement?

- Is this an example of offence for publicity-seeking sensationalism?
The question of the ethical behavior of an artist defacing or destroying another artist’s original work in order to make a new statement is one without a concrete answer.

There are no written rules presiding over this practice; the frequency of this situation has been historically sporadic, enough so that little if any literature or critical thinking has been committed to discussing the action. When examples of transgressive behavior within the arts comes to light, there is often condemnation, derision and criticism, but rarely any punitive action.

However, given the permissive practices of the current art culture, it is imperative the arts community open a dialog amongst itself and address the ramifications of this practice.
FRANCISCO GOYA (1746-1828)
THE DISASTERS OF WAR

PLATE 9. THEY DON'T LIKE IT
Francisco Goya (1746-1828)
The Disasters of War

Plate 32. Why?
Francisco Goya (1746-1828)
The Disasters of War

Plate 33. There is but more to do
Francisco Goya (1746-1828)
The Disasters of War

Plate 34. On account of a knife
Jake Or Dinos Chapman
Explaining Christians to Dinosaurs (Detail) 2003
Zygotic acceleration, biogenetic, de-sublimated libidinal model (1995)

Jake Or Dinos Chapman
JAKE OR DINOS CHAPMAN

Fuck Face Twins 1995
THE DISASTERS OF WAR (1993)
Great Feat! With Dead Men! (1994)
Gigantic Fun (2000)
In 2001 the Chapmans purchased a first-rate, mint condition set of the 1937 edition of *The Disasters of War* etchings printed directly from the artist's plates.

In terms of print connoisseurship, in terms of art history, in any terms, this is a treasure.

The Chapmans then directly painted and drew on the prints, covering the faces of the victims with clown and puppy heads. The subsequent artwork was entitled *Insult to Injury*, and made its debut in 2003.

Is this ethical?
Plate 37. This is worse

Francisco Goya
PLATE 37 (2003)  
JAKE OR DINOS CHAPMAN
Plate 71. Against the common good  
FRANCISCO GOYA
Plate 1. Gloomy premonitions of what must come to pass  

Francisco Goya
Plate 15. And there is no hope for it  

Francisco Goya
The denying of doctrinal truths - Its origin derives from a theological sense: To sin, to commit a crime against God.

Rule breaking - In the 16th century, ‘transgression’ took on a secular meaning to describe disobedience to the law. It soon expanded to include any departure from correct behavior.

The giving of serious offense – usually against a person. An act of aggression (verbal, mental or physical) that causes injury.

To exceed, erase or disorder physical or conceptual boundaries – To subvert a hierarchy, to place the subordinate over the elevated is to transgress.
In contemporary cultural discourse, the term has come to be associated with a received idea of the artist as lawless, necessarily violating the conventional and lawful (therefore committing a transgression) in the realization of his genius.

Rules are a constraint on creativity; the art canon is a tyranny from which he must free himself. This is the heroism of the artist, a transgressor for the sake of art.

This notion promotes the artist at the expense of the artwork.
Three types of transgression in art (Anthony Julius)

- **Art-rule Breaking** - An art that repudiates established art practices.
- **Taboo-Breaking** - An art that violates certain beliefs and sentiments of its audience.
- **Politically-Resistant Art** – An art that challenges the rule of the state.
Three defenses of transgressive art

- **Estrangement** –
  
  Artwork exists to shock us into grasping some truth about ourselves, the world or art itself. It endorses an art which shatters illusions, exposes prejudice, suspends received wisdom. It estranges us from the familiar; it denies us the pleasure of easy recognition. It momentarily alienates us from everyday reality.

- Art teaches us a lesson; its shocks and disturbances are justified by this overriding purpose.
Formalist-

Insists upon the form of the artwork rather than the subject of the work. It is the job of art to explore form. Art has no vocation either to change opinions in, or offer reflections of, the world. It contemplates itself, not the external world.

It is not principally the shape and structure of the artwork, but rather the character of the surface of the work, which is the product of the engagement of the artist with his given materials.
Three defenses of transgressive art

- Canonic-
  Identifies and accepts both the Estrangement and Formalist defenses, but attempts to support the work as belonging within the historical tradition of Art history. What appears as radically new and without antecedents is shown to be related to earlier artworks, and thus is vindicated as art by this lineage.

- Time-proven art is thus enlisted in support of new art.
Robert Rauschenberg  
*ERASED DE KOONING (1953)*