

Question #2:

It is easy to pretend today that humans have managed to find the “correct” answers to all of the world’s ethical and moral dilemmas and that any differences in opinion are due to one side being “wrong.” The truth, however, is that many ethical and moral questions still lack a clear answer, and these questions are still highly debated. A popular method of posing (and answering) these questions is through artistic expression, as it allows for the creator of a work to say more than they could with mere words. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, through works of art, artists can pose questions of what is considered ethical and what is considered unethical. This can be done through various means; for example, the subject of an artwork, the title, or even the mediums used can impart a deeper meaning to the audience. However, art and artists themselves are not immune to ethical issues. Artists are routinely criticized for both *what* they represent in their art and *how* they choose to represent it, and while some of this criticism can be baseless, a great deal of it is otherwise valid. Concerns over physical and mental harm, the objectification of historically marginalized groups, and cruelty towards animals are only *some* of the most pressing ethical issues surrounding contemporary art today.

Art is typically thought of as being composed of inanimate materials; however, the human body itself can be used as a medium in art. Performance art, for example, is composed of human subjects, and typically involves humans acting and reacting to their environment. Normally, these environments are not harmful to the performers; however, some artists create sets that are either uncomfortable or harmful to participants, raising ethical concerns about

whether these performance artworks are “right.” In Santiago Sierra’s piece *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes* (2000), for example, participants sit inside enclosed cardboard boxes for hours at a time. The participants, political refugees in Germany, were paid for their time, something that was impossible for them anywhere else in the country due to refugee laws.¹ Through this, Sierra had hoped to bring attention to how capitalism often forced individuals to degrade themselves to make a living; however, most of the attention the work received was criticism over Sierra’s exploitation of the refugees.² While the work’s participants *were* paid for their time, it is unlikely that they could have found work anywhere else in Germany; additionally, the conditions inside the boxes were dark, cramped, and humid, meaning that the participants were likely *very* uncomfortable.³ Obviously, some concerns would be raised over works of art that subject human participants to stressful conditions; however, what if a work’s participant is the artists themselves? Wafaa Bilal’s *Domestic tension* (2007) raises this question, as the performance piece involved Bilal livestreaming himself sitting in the way of a paintball gun controlled by viewers of the stream. Viewers could shoot Bilal; however, they did not have to, and they were allowed to move the gun so that it could not shoot him.⁴ Due to the gun being controlled over a livestream, many viewers, emboldened by their anonymity, fired the gun relentlessly; however, if a viewer was ever confronted by Bilal about their actions, they would quickly back down and start to justify their actions.⁵ Bilal’s purpose in making *Domestic tension* was primarily to bring attention to the callousness of modern warfare, where drone pilots could kill people from thousands of miles away.⁶ However, the work itself raises questions on what is considered “acceptable” for artists to do to themselves. On one hand, Bilal has the

¹ Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 22.

² Wickre, *ARTH 326*, In-class lecture.

³ Wickre, *ARTH 326*, In-class lecture.

⁴ Ingram, *Experimental geopolitics: Wafaa Bilal’s “Domestic tension,”* 130.

⁵ Ingram, 127-128.

⁶ Ingram, 126.

autonomy to subject himself to this pain, but on the other hand, at what point does it go too far? If Bilal were to stream himself being severely injured of his own volition, would it be right to stop him from harming himself in the name of art? The use of people in performance artwork with adverse conditions is still heavily debated on, and clear limits have yet to be defined.

Just because some human subjects are not exposed to harm or discomfort, however, does not mean that problems remain around them being used in art. For example, if a person is used as a model for a work of art and the work is a critical and commercial success, is the model owed any part of that success? After all, *their* body is the basis of the work, and the artist merely depicted it. Additionally, if an artist uses a model from a marginalized group of which they themselves are not a part of, do they deserve any of the success they receive from the art created? Ethical concerns such as these are commonly discussed when representing bodies that are viewed to deviate from societal norms. Marc Quinn's *Breath* (2012), a giant inflatable replica of one of Quinn's earlier works of disabled artist Alison Lapper, was praised by some as portraying disability in a positive light.⁷ However, in the years following its creation there was considerable criticism over the fact that while Quinn's career had skyrocketed after he created the sculpture, Lapper had not enjoyed the same measure of success; despite being lauded as a "hero," she was unable to successfully sell any of *her* work involving her body.⁸ This difference in treatment between Quinn and Lapper could be criticized as evidence of the objectification of disabled people in the art world; a world where people love to applaud disabled people and artists as "heroic" but refuse to treat them fairly. Disabled subjects are not the only kinds of people that are viewed to sometimes be objectified, however. Queer and trans bodies, long absent from mainstream art, have in recent years become more visible both as artists and as subjects of

⁷ Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 103.

⁸ Josefson, *The Fourth Plinth: raising the issue of disability*.

artworks; this increase in the portrayal of these bodies, however, has led to concerns that queer and trans subjects are sometimes exoticized and otherized by artists. Jenny Saville's *Matrix* (1999), for example, depicts trans artist Del LaGrace Volcano in the nude. Volcano's pose is designed to look uncomfortable, mirroring body dysmorphia; however, the brazen display of Volcano's entire body may lead one to believe that Saville is treating him as more of a prop and less as a person.⁹ Volcano himself originally feared this during the portrait's creation, fearing that the work might "dislocate and/or diminish [his] transgendered maleness."¹⁰ While Saville might have nothing but good intentions in portraying trans bodies, the fact still remains that there is considerable debate over whether a non-trans woman could ever adequately depict a trans person in art. While the increased portrayal of historically marginalized peoples in recent years is a positive, there is still plenty of discourse around who exactly can and should depict these bodies in the art world.

Many ethical issues in art surround the usage of humans in works of art; however, humans are not the only living beings that are used. Animals are often used in art to either stand in for the "natural world" or to comment on human behavior by comparing or contrasting them to humans. Given that a great deal of modern society focuses on humanity's capacity for cruelty and violence, it is these qualities that are often discussed when comparing humans and animals. Unlike humans, animals are not (or at least not that we know of) conscious of their violent actions, and do not ascribe morality to their actions, and many artists seek to display this difference between humans and animals. However, some artists use live animals to make their points, and the conditions they place these animals in are hotly debated on. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* (2003), for example, is a recording of former fighting

⁹ Halberstam, *The Body in Question: Transgender Images in Contemporary Visual Art*, 37.

¹⁰ Halberstam, 37.

dogs that are forced onto treadmills facing each other for seven minutes, and the resulting attempts by each dog to chase at and maul each other serve as a metaphor for war and conflict.¹¹ However, much of the attention the work received was negative, as special attention was focused on how much the dogs seemed to have been suffering, and animal rights organizations decried the showcasing of purported animal abuse in an art museum. When the work was displayed in the Guggenheim museum in New York, opposition to it was so fierce that the museum received numerous threats of violence, leading them to pull the work from its exhibit.¹² *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* was not the only work from that exhibit that was removed due to public outcry, however; Huang Yong Ping's *Theatre of the World* (1993) was also criticized for its usage of animals. The work featured reptiles, amphibians, and insects being thrown into an enclosed space, where they would then either kill each other or die of exhaustion; the animals serve as stand-ins for humans, and the work is meant to symbolize the potential for conflict when different groups of people intermingle.¹³ Animal rights groups, however, argued that the work contained animal abuse and that it was wholly unnecessary for Ping to use live animals to convey his message. While *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* and *Theatre of the World* no doubt have deeper reasons for using live animals to convey their messages, placing these animals in such horrible conditions detracts from these messages by making any debate about the pieces about how the animals were treated. While legally speaking animals do not have the same rights as humans, treating them horribly is still highly looked down upon in society, art or not.

Ultimately, how exactly living subjects, both human and animal, should be treated in the art world is still up for debate. The ethics of subjecting vulnerable humans to uncomfortable situations, objectifying marginalized groups, and treating animals cruelly in art are not set in

¹¹ Wickre, *ARTH 326*, In-class lecture.

¹² Helmore, "Can mistreated dogs ever be considered art?"

¹³ Helmore.

stone; additionally, all of these practices are tacitly still permitted in art, provided that they do not violate the law of wherever they are created and displayed. Any critiques of these practices, therefore, are not so emblematic of “censorship” as of the changing of tastes as time progresses. At the same time, artists that still use these practices are not doing so out of pure ignorance and malice; rather, they feel that these practices will enhance their messages (although the discussions that these practices generate often *detract* from their intended messages). Still, just because something is legal does not mean that it is morally “right,” and works of art such as *Theatre of the World* and *Domestic tension* demonstrate that while a work can be legally permissible, it can also be ethically dubious. Ultimately, there is much controversy in the art world over the ethics surrounding the treatment of living subjects, both human and animal, and discussions over these issues are often centered around numerous works of art where the subjects were treated inappropriately, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Question #3:

When people are asked what makes modern society “modern,” much of the time they will point to the numerous technological advances made in recent years that have improved society. Humans are now able to do things they could only once dream of: they can build buildings impossibly high, they can transmit thoughts and ideas across the world in seconds, and they can even create their own realities. However, all of this newfound power has caused considerable damage to society, as many humans now view themselves as being “above” all other beings and have no qualms about destroying the natural world for their own greed, leaving behind artificially-created “nature” to serve as a reminder for what once was. As nature suffers and Earth’s condition worsens, humans turn to technology to save them; however, technology itself is

often used to control and occupy the population, from the rise of the surveillance state to the addictive nature of social media. Additionally, as humanity asserts its control over the natural world, many have considered the ramifications this control has on their spiritual beliefs. With humans now able to create entirely new species and program machines to work faster than any human ever could, some began to wonder if humans could consider themselves to be close to divinity. Technology has ultimately massively influenced how we live today and how we might live in the future, and this is reflected through contemporary works of art that often draw on contemporary advancements in technology.

As the world becomes more and more industrialized, nature suffers as a result. Large swathes of forest are cut down, the earth is dug up in search of useful minerals, and pollution infects the land, sea, and air in the pursuit of further industrialization. Humans ravage the environment for their own aims and leave ruined ecosystems in their wake, with some ecosystems left impossible to recover. Some artists, seeing the rapid erosion of nature, have taken it upon themselves to voice their frustration through art by using technology to illustrate how nature itself is quickly becoming artificial. Tue Greenfort's *Diffuse Einträge* (2007), for example, is composed of a pumping machine that sucks water from a polluted lake, treats it with a chlorine mixture, and spews it back into the lake. At a glance the machine *looks* as if it is helping the lake, as the water pumped back into the lake looks much cleaner than it was originally; however, in reality, this water is as polluted as it was before and merely *looks* fine.¹⁴ This pristine image of “nature” is artificially created and highlights how the natural world is becoming less and less natural. Some artists take more direct means to display “artificial nature,” however. Tamiko Thiel's *Unexpected Growth* (2018) uses augmented reality to display virtual sea life and pollution in an otherwise empty courtyard in Manhattan. Thiel had intended for the

¹⁴ Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 304-305.

work to serve as a message on human-caused rising sea levels, framing the virtual sea life as an omen for the future; however, the work also serves as a reflection on how humans are altering nature into something it was not originally.¹⁵ Thiel is predicting that one day the sea level will rise enough so that the museum will be filled with actual coral; however, the conditions that will cause this are created by humans. Would that not make the future sea life artificial on some level, since they never would have grown there if not for humans? What makes them less artificial than Thiel's work? By blurring the lines between what is "natural" and what is "artificial," artists such as Greenfort and Thiel use technology in their work to illustrate how "nature" is quickly becoming more and more artificial.

New technologies have allowed for people around the world to interact with each other in ways never before thought possible. With the development of photography and videography, people can now see lifelike depictions of others without needing to be in the same time and place as them. Additionally, with the rise of social media people can now share images and videos with as many people as they want, creating online communities based on shared interests. However, for all the good these innovations have done for the world, they can still be used in harmful ways by both states and individuals, and this fact is explored by artists. Julia Scher's *Security by Julia II* (1989), for example, examines the rise of "the surveillance state" and its repercussions on society. The work is composed of multiple security cameras randomly situated around wherever the piece is being exhibited, with a central terminal allowing viewers to see through the lens of the cameras.¹⁶ The piece reflects the anxiety that comes with a heavily surveilled society; while those with access to the central terminal know what is being observed, those that do not have no idea when they are being watched, as the locations of the camera are never in the same place

¹⁵ Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 335-336.

¹⁶ Robertson and McDaniel, 115.

they were in previous installations. People do not know exactly whether they are being watched or not, creating a climate of fear through the use of videography. States are not the only entities that abuse advances in photography and videography, however; on social media, many people use photos and videos to actively promote harmful lifestyles to others. Amalia Ulman reflects this trend in *Excellences & Perfections* (2014) by documenting on Instagram her attempts at becoming a model through increasingly drastic means; however, unbeknownst to her audience at the time, she was only *pretending* to pursue a modeling career (however, some aspects of the piece, such as her pole-dancing training and dieting, *were* real).¹⁷ While many would view Ulman's posts as a record of her physically and mentally damaging herself, others might aspire to be like her; after all, the viewer is only able to see what Ulman wants them to see. By selectively editing and posting, Ulman mimics the practices of other social media influencers that attempt to sell their viewers on a lifestyle while deceiving them about what the lifestyle actually entails. Scher and Ulman use advancements in photography and videography to comment on how these advancements have been misused to instill fear and insecurity in the population.

As technology continues to advance, humans are now able to do things that were once thought to be impossible. The invention of the computer, for instance, has allowed humans to complete tasks that would have taken years before in mere seconds. Complex mathematical equations and financial transactions are now completed in the blink of an eye. Another example of humanity's current technological prowess can be seen in the study of genetics; humans can now manipulate genes that radically alter living beings, allowing them to engineer existing species or even create new ones. With all of this power at humanity's fingertips, however, some have wondered whether traditional notions of religion and spirituality are outdated: does worshipping a higher power make sense now that humans themselves are quasi-divine? Some

¹⁷ Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 79.

artists seek to explore this conundrum by using these advanced technologies in their art to comment on human spirituality. Gerhard Richter's *Cologne Cathedral, south transept window* (2007), for example, intersects spirituality with technology; Richter developed the pattern of the window by using a random number generator to decide the color of each pixel of the grid, and he stated that he wanted the work to represent "cosmic infinity and incomprehensibility."¹⁸ Given that the work is situated in a cathedral, one might assume that the "cosmic infinity" Richter is referring to comes from a higher power; however, Richter was only able to depict this infinity by using a computer, a man-made invention. He did not receive "divine inspiration" in how to compose the window: he merely ran a random number generator and based his work off of the computer's results. Other artists are more overt in their connections between spirituality and technology, however; Eduardo Kac fixates his art around the Old Testament concept of humanity's "dominion" over nature, and this can be seen most clearly in his work *The Eighth Day* (2001).¹⁹ The work is comprised of numerous animal species that have been placed into one large terrarium; additionally, each animal in the enclosure has been genetically engineered to glow in the dark.²⁰ While at first it might seem that the work is merely a commentary on humanity's scientific and technological advancements, its title distinctly refers to the seven days that God took to create the world in the Old Testament book of Genesis. By referring to the seven days, Kac is implying that the "eighth day" is not only here, but that it is being led by humans, not God. Overall, both artists use technology in their work to discuss the religious and spiritual ramifications of humanity's recent scientific and technological advancements.

Given the vast amount of problems that have arisen as the result of technological progress, some might argue that perhaps either we should stall on developing new technologies

¹⁸ Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 346.

¹⁹ Robertson and McDaniel, 340.

²⁰ Robertson and McDaniel, 342.

or that we should even reverse course. Advocating for a return to a past where humanity was more attuned to nature, many of them ignore that “technology” does not merely refer to modern inventions like computers and electricity but also to ancient inventions such as the wheel and writing. Additionally, forcing the entire world to simply stop developing new technologies and ideas is simply impossible; humans are naturally curious, so no matter what there will be at least *some* people trying to innovate. The problems that come with recent advancements in technology are *not* due to the technologies themselves; rather, they are due to how they are used by people. Most technology (excluding the kinds that are solely designed to cause harm, like guns and bombs) are neutral in their ideology: it is their *users* that make them “good” or “bad.” For example, while Kac displays how genetic engineering can be exploited to give humans a sense of false divinity, it can also be used to treat and cure hereditary diseases. While Ulman shows how social media can be damaging to one’s self-image, it can also create friendships and relationships that would have never been possible otherwise. Ultimately, while the degradation of nature, the divisiveness of surveillance and social media, and the theological implications of technological advances are discussed in art through the use of technology, it is important to realize that *humans* create technology; therefore, any problems that are caused by technology are caused by humans, and any solutions must also come from humans.