Chapter 4
Moral conflict, cultural pluralism and contemporary visual arts education

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Between 2004 and 2006, four visual arts students at the University of Sydney claimed to be offended and disturbed by contemporary art. Three indicated that a conflict with religious beliefs was the cause of distress, and two commented that they felt ostracised by peers and teachers for practising religion. One student objected to the performances of French artist Orlan on the grounds she interferes with the ‘natural’ body through reconstructive surgery. The student requested warnings with slides and the right not to view. The request presents a dilemma for teachers who believe in the ethics of the right to freedom of expression over censorship, and calls into question a fundamental assumption of education in the field of visual arts: that trainee artists are eager to engage with the dissonance of contemporary art. On the contrary, it appears that some would prefer to be shielded from a full representation of it.

The discussion that follows is based on the written views of four students. While the research sample is too small to bring empirical rigor to the study, the comments are presented as indications of the presence of a problem on campus, and one that has much wider community significance. Moral conflict in the learning environment affects every equity group at university, but the resurgence of religion in contemporary society and the growing diversity of university populations, suggest that religious-based conflict in education will increase. Further, this is one of the first inquiries into the subject of moral conflict among visual arts students at tertiary level in Australia. The body of literature on overseas cases also appears small. By comparison, there is a large body of research addressing moral conflict among medical students, the aim of which is to educate medical practitioners of high moral character in order to raise the standard of ethics within the profession (Feudtner, Christakis & Christakis, 1994, pp. 670-679). By contrast, the motivation for this inquiry is not to raise the moral character of professional artists but rather to scrutinise a paradox in contemporary art education and use research to establish how others negotiate both practical and theoretical solutions to moral conflict in the broader field of learning and teaching.

The case of four students at Sydney College of the Arts cautions us to be attentive to the social makeup of the student body, hone skills at discussion as a way of teaching, review the contemporaneity of course content, and question the cultural assumptions that underpin curricula.

The learning context
Sydney College of the Arts is a faculty of visual arts at the University of Sydney. Its mission is to ‘educate and train those who will practice as makers or interpreters of contemporary art, craft and design’ (Sydney College of the Arts, 2005). Students undertake an integrated program of studio practice and art theory. The art school was founded in 1975 following 1960s idealism when art’s social role was to offer ‘insight

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into what it means to be free in emotional response, and free in the choice of ideas’ (Taylor, 1960, p. 60). When Sydney College of the Arts amalgamated with the University of Sydney in 1990, it joined an institution founded on the principle of academic freedom, a philosophy that further validates the significance of its own professional ethics of freedom of expression.

Students are encouraged to engage with social and cultural issues relevant to the contemporary world, and challenge their own assumptions about the nature of art. A culture of dissonance is encouraged. In 2004, when this study began, first-year students were shown a representation of contemporary international art including works that have been embroiled in public controversy and censorship: S&M photographs from the X Portfolio (1978) by Robert Mapplethorpe; surgery photographs of Orlan’s operations (from 1990); sculptures of anatomically perverse children titled Tragic Anatomies (1996) by Jake, and Dinos Chapman; a bust of frozen human blood titled Self (1991) by Marc Quinn; and a photograph of a crucifix immersed in urine titled Piss Christ (1989) by Andres Serrano. Each has provoked the response: ‘But is it Art?’

The research problem and methodology

In 2004, when eighty first-year visual arts students returned routine university course evaluation questionnaires for their art theory unit, two students complained of feeling emotionally and physically disturbed by slides shown in lectures. Neither student identified the art works, but their comments were unprecedented in sixteen years of evaluation of art theory, and set in train an inquiry into the incidence of moral conflict in contemporary visual arts education.

The experiences of colleagues in other visual arts faculties in Australia and the United States were sought. As the research progressed it became increasingly important to identify works of art that cause disturbance for students, therefore in 2006 the faculty’s Learning and Teaching Committee supported the design of a second, anonymous and voluntary questionnaire on the subject of moral conflict. The questionnaire was designed by art theory staff, and made available to students in their final year of undergraduate study. Two students from a cohort of one hundred and thirty responded negatively. The information was then assessed in relation to literature on diversity and equity, as well as censorship and moral rights as they affect visual arts.

This study is therefore based on written responses collected over two years. Staff ascertain, on the basis of different handwriting and syntax that they are written by four different people.

Student comments: 2004 formal student evaluation questionnaires

Student A remarked that ‘often the works on slide were disturbing & offending’ and, when asked about overall satisfaction with the quality of the unit of study, responded negatively: ‘because the works that were chosen by the lecturers were sometimes too shocking & very offending especially the religious & racial issues’. Student A judged the unit as unsatisfactory because ‘the type of work that were shown is just too contemporary, and they aren’t the type of work that I go for nor interested in’. The unit of study was criticised three times for focusing on works that were either ‘too contemporary’, or simply ‘contemporary’ (anonymous response, student evaluation questionnaire, first semester, 2004).
During the same evaluation process Student B acknowledged that the course material ‘does make me see art in different perspectives, but, it simply makes me feel disturbed most of the time’. Student B ticked the box ‘disagree’ when asked to confirm satisfaction with the course, because ‘what affects me more is the feeling left inside me after these lectures. The artworks are mostly disturbing, hence most of the time I’m left feeling depressed, and filled with anxiety, some-times anger. This really affects me this past 3 months’ (anonymous response, student evaluation questionnaire, first semester, 2004).

**Student comments: 2006 informal faculty questionnaires**

Students C and D criticised the intolerance of peers and teachers to religious faith, and they criticised lecturers for choosing to show psychologically ‘disturbing’ slides (anonymous response, Moral Conflict and Visual Arts Education questionnaire, June, 2006).

Student C not only felt ‘uninspired’ by peers, but did not ‘enjoy coming to uni as much, and it is a contributing factor that has made me change my goals’. Student C identified as ‘mature age’, and felt that viewing works of contemporary art should be optional, arguing that ‘I totally agree with freedom of expression, but there should also be freedom of choice to view these things’ (anonymous response, Moral Conflict and Visual Arts Education questionnaire, 2006):

Lecturers could state the nature of the artwork & have a raise of hands if this will offend anyone, & give warnings to those (if any) when the details of the artwork are shown/discussed, so they have an opportunity to leave for 5 mins or however long the lecturer recommends. Sometimes things that I know I cannot change, annoy me so much id rather not know they exist (anonymous response, Moral Conflict and Visual Arts Education questionnaire, 2006).

Student C identified, as ‘disturbing’, the work of French artist Orlan – who changes her body through plastic surgery – and disapproved of any artist involved ‘with altering the body permanently’. When asked if there is sufficient opportunity, and encouragement on campus to discuss moral conflict, Student C responded that this was best done ‘with friends & family outside of uni’ rather than with peers who did not share similar views (anonymous response, Moral Conflict and Visual Arts Education questionnaire, 2006).

In 2006, Student D, who identified as ‘religious’, and ‘Catholic’, was aware that conflict was ‘often the intention of the artist’ but was concerned about negativity to religious beliefs on campus, and being labelled ‘religious’ by other students and staff. When asked if there was sufficient opportunity to air views about moral conflict on campus, Student D, whose artistic work addresses the Catholic Church, claimed that this had impacted on ambitions to become an artist ‘as I sometimes feel as though I can’t freely express my ideas. They will be criticised merely because people have a problem with the Catholic church not because of the actual work’. The student described a ‘split between the religious & non-religious students’, and criticised staff for ‘their own personal slagging’ to ‘highlight flaws in the church’ (anonymous response, Moral Conflict and Visual Arts Education questionnaire, 2006).

The 2006 questionnaire did not specifically ask students about religious moral conflict. However, both respondents focused on religion. Therefore, before reflecting on comments cited above, a brief orientation will be given to current perceptions and
discussions of the growth in religion and moral conservatism, on a global scale, and in learning and teaching environments.

A social context
Recent Australian media coverage suggests that the liberal pedagogical ethos of universities is no longer in step with the changing demographic of student bodies (Blue, 2005, p. 9). The Evangelical Union has a growing presence on the University of Sydney’s campuses, a situation that is described as ‘a reality that defies the public stereotype of uni as a zone of youthful rebellion, free love, and political activism’ (Blue, 2005, p. 9). The wider context for this is the resurgence of religion as one of the most significant social changes in the contemporary world. Roman Catholicism is ‘now a vastly complex religious community of one billion adherents, more than 17 per cent of the world’s population’ (Weigel, 1999, p. 20), and it has been noted that ‘for the last three or four decades there has been a steady global upsurge in conservative Protestant Christianity parallel to the upsurge in conservative Islam’ (Martin, 1999, p. 37).

Analysis of student comments
The comments cited above indicate that the four students in question are not integrated within the wider community of the faculty: they stay silent; they use anonymous questionnaires to express opinions; they prefer to air their ideas outside university among family and friends; they propose leaving the lecture theatre to avoid looking at works of art that disturb them. But their responses also suggest they feel personally divided. Two practice separation from the wider Sydney College of the Arts community but at the same time are politicised in their views about inclusiveness. Iris Young has studied similar feelings of discord among minority groups. In Education in the Context of Structural Injustice she argues that marginalised groups will claim freedom of speech, and assert ‘difference as cultural expression’, but will also display a desire to separate rather than participate in wider communities (Young, 2006, p. 101). This is perceived as an obstacle to education by George Petelin, who is a Senior Lecturer in Art Theory at Queensland College of Art in Australia. He characterises the obstacle as

...the desire on the part of students to preserve identification with peer groups away from their place of learning. Education always alienates people from the beliefs they previously shared with friends and relatives and thus has the potential to socially distance them. The stress of this needs to be acknowledged and accommodated within pedagogy. (G. Petelin, personal communication, August 4, 2006)

The social complexity of today’s universities is the subject of on-going research by Canadian psychologists. One team has looked specifically at moral behaviour in undergraduates to understand the relationships between religion, identity and moral reasoning (Maclean, Walker & Matsuba, 2004). They cite the earlier work of Marcia et al., whose research into the psychosocial development of individuals, argues that religion is ‘a significant component of identity formation’ (Marcia et al as cited in Maclean, Walker & Matsuba, 2004, p. 429). This is supported by comments from Students C and D who stress the importance of religious practice and religious moralism to their personal identities and artistic development. Student D is aware that contemporary artists often intend to create moral conflict for the viewer, but accuses Sydney College of the Arts of being hypocritical: religious conviction is ‘a form of expression not encouraged. Which is a form of censorship in itself’ (anonymous
response, Moral Conflict and Visual Arts Education questionnaire, 2006). The comment draws attention to the complexities of the concepts of academic freedom and freedom of expression, when these are relative to teachers, students, the institution, the discipline and the profession.

Academic freedom in the classroom is an exceedingly complex, and ill-defined topic. The freedom of the individual professor must be balanced against not only the academic freedom of the corporate body of the faculty to design, and implement curricular requirements, but also against the academic freedom of students (Post, 2006, p. 79).

Consider the competing claims on academic freedom and artistic freedom created by Student C’s suggestion for staff to provide warnings with slides. The student is offended by the work of performance artist Orlan and in the name of academic freedom, wants the right to censor the work by having it figuratively or literally blocked from view. The lecturer also claims academic freedom and feels it is right to show slides of Orlan’s work, without providing warnings, because while the graphic imagery of her operations is repulsive, its grotesquery is integral to its critique of the cultural longing for beauty. This is why Orlan says to her audience, ‘Sorry for having to make you suffer’ (as cited in Zimmermann, 2002, p. 38). However, can the lecturer expect students to suspend their views and beliefs and assume a disinterested or detached stance towards the work?

The disinterested viewer and students who claims a right not to view
Feminism has sustained one of the most influential critiques of the concept of the disinterested observer, who is supposed to be neutral in order to be unreservedly receptive to art. Pen Dalton argues that contemporary art education places an ideological emphasis on the disinterested observer and freedom of expression because the philosophy of art schools is still based in dated modernist principles (Dalton, 1995, p. 45). Feminists argue that the Western idea of a neutral viewer is ‘white, male and middle-class’ (Deepwell, 1995, p. 8). These arguments are relevant to many social groups, including students with religious beliefs, and claim the impossibility of disinterestedness for minorities and those who are disadvantaged or discriminated against.

However, feminist author Peggy Zeglin Brand argues that while an interested stance is important, it is also important with feminist art such as Orlan’s, to experience it disinterestedly (Brand, 1998, p. 5). For the person who prefers not to view Orlan’s work, Brand presents a model encouraging them to embrace the conflicting experiences of the work so there is ‘a deliberate shift toward viewing bloody facial features as combinations of reds and purples, darks and lights, and a shift to reflection on the concept of women and of art exploited by the performance series’ (Brand, 1998, p. 8-9). This may be easier said than done.

Why not just warn students, or allow them to look away? The argument returns to censorship. Feminist critique has also been energetic, but fractured, on the subject of censorship. Anna Douglas argues for regulation, believing that the arts community must confront the question of appropriate and inappropriate subject-matter as a way of addressing social inequalities. She questions ‘the moral absolutist terms of the ‘freedom of speech’ criteria’ that claim censorship is bad and free expression is good, and argues for a more circumspect view of the role of censorship so that art is not elitist, but properly connected with its social context (Douglas, 1995, pp. 102-109).
Censorship and comparative case-studies from Australia and the United States
In the late 1980’s, in the U.S, art and censorship became ‘a litmus test of beliefs about sexuality, public decency, obscenity, and the limits of tolerance’ (Devereaux, 1993, p. 208). Today, at the University of North Iowa, Associate Professor of Art, Timothy B. Dooley, directs students to Cynthia Freeland’s book *But is it Art?*, and in particular the chapter ‘Blood, and Beauty’ in which the author questions the motivation for the stress on blood in contemporary art. By reading this text students become aware that there is an extended discourse around the strategy of ‘shock’.

In the end, I subscribe to the ‘fair warning’ policy, wherein I inform students from the beginning that we will be looking at contemporary art, and contemporary artists are more than willing to ‘boldly go’ as the saying says. I tell them that if they are not comfortable with dealing with the full scope of humanity, then they can drop the course, and choose another instructor (T. Dooley, personal communication, April 13, 2006).

Students at the University of North Iowa comment that they are, ‘shocked by the absence of what they would deem the ‘beautiful’ in much contemporary art’ (T. Dooley, personal communication, April 13, 2006), but no-one has requested censorship of lecture material.

In Australia, George Petelin of Queensland College of Art observes that ‘aesthetic conservatism seems to accompany moral fundamentalism’, and cites the example of a student who ‘complained in a course titled *International Avant-garde* that he did not know why we had to learn about so many artists who deal with “perversion” and “politics”’ (G.Petelin, personal communication, June 13, 2006). Petelin’s strategy was to ask the student to propose his preferred selection of artists. When the names ‘Rembrandt’ and ‘Arthur Boyd’ were offered, Petelin prepared a lecture for students in which he demonstrated that even the canon of art is not without shock, and that the aesthetics of traditional art, including religious art, is not something necessarily apolitical, pleasing to the senses, or without perversion. The manner in which Petelin negotiated the complaint, by integrating the student’s sense of moral conflict into the study of art history, provides an excellent model for others. Petelin was presented with a challenge to his ownership of teaching and met it by encouraging the student to influence curriculum.

Petelin’s strategy also reinforces the pedagogically-sound logic of demonstrating how historical art, and contemporary art, share a great deal in common and that students who bring narrow assumptions about both to their study must expect to have these challenged by deeper knowledge of their discipline.

If we censor out what is actually happening in the world we may as well close our universities. By all means treat people’s beliefs, about what should be, politely, but let’s not walk about with blinkers on about what is (G.Petelin, personal communication, June 13, 2006).

Changes to learning and teaching practices at Sydney College of the Arts
Petelin and Dooley seem confident in the appropriateness of their curricula. However in the course of this research, art theory staff at Sydney College of the Arts questioned the contemporaneity of theirs. The curriculum is clearly underpinned by ideological emphasis on the autonomy of art, the neutral observer, the wholly receptive student and freedom of expression, but these concepts are not presented to students as objects for scrutiny.
Following the example of George Petelin who teaches students that the history of art is inseparable from the subject of morality, the curriculum now includes a focus on freedom of expression, and censorship. At the conclusion of this research, in October 2006, art theory staff asked a large group of first-year students if they had experienced moral conflict with examples of contemporary art, and were overwhelmed by the affirmative response. Many were disturbed by a recorded performance by Chinese artist Zhu Yu, titled Eating People (2000). The artist is filmed eating a human foetus as a protest against moral judgment. While the majority of students were morally outraged by the work, one argued for the right of the artist to freedom of expression. The discussion soon became confrontational. Staff encouraged students to reflect on the role that their personal beliefs played in determining their responses, a method that John Swift and John Steers advocate for secondary teaching because it improves respect for difference, plurality, and independence of mind, which in turn shape learners with ‘interpersonal tolerance’ (Swift & Steers, 1999, p. 7).

However, through research, we have learnt that there are other strategies for discussion that recommend the expression of emotions rather than suppression. In Discussion as a Way of Teaching, Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill address the appropriateness of strong emotions such as anger and argue that:

[teachers wrongly]…think that classrooms are an inappropriate place for expressing anger or grief. But if we want people to express themselves honestly, and openly, tolerating, and even respecting expressions of strong feeling may be an important part of talking across differences (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 136).

Brookfield and Preskill advise against expecting discussion to resolve differences among people of divergent cultural and ethnic groups, and claim ‘that confrontation of difference is instructive to showing how certain voices have been silenced’ (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 26). Their theories share ideas in common with the work of Jack Arbuthnot and David Faust who advocate a course of action to create ‘disequilibration’ for students. They argue that cognitive development in individuals can be stimulated by the creation of conflicts in thinking. In Teaching Moral Reasoning: Theory and Practice, Arbuthnot and Faust stress that disequilibration is not about creating stress for students. It is about allowing students to be curious, and stretch their tolerance as well as challenge their views on the world (Arbuthnot & Faust, 1981, p. 141).

In the course of this research we have learnt to communicate differently with the student body at Sydney College of the Arts by seeking a deeper understanding of their welfare over and above academic performance. The research confirms the importance of an ethics of teaching, attained through discussions that are sensitive to the social and intellectual anxieties of students, and a curriculum that is transparent to the key philosophical underpinnings of the discipline and profession: one that embraces the full spectrum of contemporary art. Secondary school pedagogy has set a benchmark by establishing an ethics of learning and teaching for visual arts based on a partnership between education and what is being practiced in the profession, so that contemporary art is never taught as something problematic (Burgess & Addison, 2004, pp. 15-39). The case at Sydney College of the Arts also confirms the importance of an ethics of learning, attained through participation in discussions, so that students will graduate with the university’s key generic graduate attribute: ‘an informed respect for the principles, methods, standards, values, and boundaries of their discipline, and the capacity to question these’ (Institute for Teaching and Learning, 2004).
Conclusion
Contemporary art can be confronting on grounds of race, religion, and sex. The controversies of contemporary art are of interest to every discipline in the humanities, which is why, in 2006, British philosopher, Matthew Kieran, posed the question: ‘Imagine that you have just seen or read a work you find deeply troubling. Why?’ (Kieran, 2006, p. 129).

This chapter on the subject of moral conflict and contemporary visual arts education is based on the written comments of four visual arts students. While small in number their comments amplify an unfamiliar voice within the student population of Sydney College of the Arts, one that asserts religious moralism as grounds for evaluation of course content, and for criticism of campus life. The study shows there is no homogenous body of learners at Sydney College of the Arts who collectively place the ethics of freedom of artistic expression above other ‘faiths’. In 1975, when Sydney College of the Arts was founded, it would have seemed implausible that future members of the student population would claim a right to disengagement with contemporary art on moral grounds. In 2006, in a global context where religion is a major source of conflict, it seems implausible that there is so little literature on moral conflict and visual arts pedagogy at tertiary level.

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