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**The Art of Air-Conditioning: Disgust through
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Candidate Number 40587



THE ART OF AIR-CONDITIONING: DISGUST THROUGH DEMATERIALIZATION

Dissertation submitted for the Degree of B.A. Honours in History of Art
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Abstract

The summer of 2012 was one of spectacles, but behind the grandeur of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the London 2012 Olympics were two modern art installations which generated their own distinctive stirs. I visited the '*Art about the Unseen, 1957-2012*' exhibition at the Hayward Gallery and Damien Hirst's retrospective at the Tate Modern within a week of each other and was intrigued to find within each an installation which employed air-conditioning to significant controversial effect. Kieran Cashell's *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* provides an extensive exploration of how to approach such provocative artworks and with his ideas in mind, this dissertation will explore how the medium of air contributes to a dematerialisation, with the result of fostering ethical rather than aesthetic judgements. My first-hand experiences of Damien Hirst's *In and Out of Love (White Paintings with Live Butterflies)* and Teresa Margolles' *Aire/Air* which was featured in the Hayward Gallery's exhibition were united in a sensation of disgust which inspired this study of the role of disgust in art to challenge complacency, create controversy, and resultantly provoke ethical thinking. Through direct and participatory experience, these installations encouraged a highly subjective and total form of perception which is reflected in the phenomenological approach adopted in this study. As my research has progressed, what has become increasingly fascinating is the idea that the audience, myself included, may actually enjoy the sensation of disgust and this dissertation explores this paradoxical phenomenon as an embodiment of the 'conceptual sublime.'

THE ART OF AIR-CONDITIONING: DISGUST THROUGH DEMATERIALISATION

Introduction

The true painter of the future will be a mute poet who will write nothing, but will recount an immense, limitless painting, without articulating, in silence. Yves Klein, 1960.¹

On the 25th April 1958, Yves Klein hoped to bring an intensely personal experience to visitors of his empty exhibition at the Galerie Iris Clert in Paris. *Le Vide/The Void* [Fig.1] embodied his conviction that a gallery could be entirely divorced from the “mundane realm of objects”² and Klein spent two days emptying the gallery and painting it white; devoting the exhibition to the indefinable aura of great artworks, or what he called the ‘immaterial.’ Nine years later, Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin proposed in their *Art & Language* article, ‘Remarks on Air-Conditioning: An Extravaganza of Blandness,’³ that an empty, air-conditioned gallery space was simply a framework for the complex artwork, which constituted the actual artwork itself. Concepts of invisible or dematerialised art are at first glance wrought with contradiction; they are visually banal yet the ideas behind can be complex and controversial. The casual critic might remark that Klein, Baldwin and Atkinson are simply

¹ Yves Klein, ‘La guerre,’ *Dimanche*, 3 (Dimanche, ‘Le Dépassement de la problématique de l’art et autres écrits, 206), (trans.) Denys Riout, *Yves Klein: Expressing the Immaterial* (Paris, 2010), 95.

² Hannah Weitemeier, *Klein, 1928-1962: international Klein blue* (Taschen, 2001), 31.

³ Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin, ‘Remarks on Air-Conditioning: An Extravaganza of Blandness,’ in, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Massachusetts, 1999), 32-34.

“full of hot air,” and yet what can be said of modern art installations which are simply that: rooms full of air?

2012 saw the re-emergence of two provocative art installations: Damien Hirst’s *In and Out of Love (White Paintings with Live Butterflies)*⁴ [Fig.2] and Teresa Margolles’ *Aire/Air* [Fig.3]. Hirst’s installation was first exhibited in 1991 in a derelict building in London, and saw its reproduction at the considerably more grandiose Tate Modern whereas the 2003 *Aire/Air* was replicated at the Hayward Gallery as part of the ‘*Art about the Unseen, 1957-2012*’ exhibition. Both installations have generated controversy and yet these polemics have become integral to our interpretations of the artworks themselves. This study will suggest that controversy can be hidden behind something as banal and unexceptional as the air that fills the rooms.

Two air-conditioning units sit on either side of *Aire/Air* which is an otherwise empty white room. The visitor enters the humid space through PVC strip curtains and a plaque informs them that the water in the air-coolers was taken from a mortuary in Texas, and was previously used to wash the bodies of murder victims. Entering through an identical set of medical curtains, visitors to *In and Out of Love* are systematically herded through the muggy and heated room in groups by gallery staff; they experience first-hand the life cycle as humidifiers encourage butterflies to hatch, fly about the room, get drunk on bowls of ripe fruit and die in front of their eyes.

It comes as little surprise that the most frequently approached theme common to these artists is life and death; R. Scott Bray suggests that inherent to Margolles’ work is the “notion of the ‘life of the corpse’[...]to illustrate that experiences after death are connected to pre-mortem

⁴ The full title of the artwork, *In and Out of Love (White Paintings with Live Butterflies)*, will from this point be shortened to *In and Out of Love*. References to the installation’s partner, *In and Out of Love (Butterfly Paintings with Ashtrays)* will here always be referred to by its full title.

existences”⁵ whilst Brian Dillon proposes that Hirst exhibits a “gleeful” attitude to mortality in order to represent life “on the edge of extinction, delicately embodied and about to be disembodied.”⁶ Thus, these installations exhibit the facts of death through direct and real experience of the air medium, as well as conveying complex emotional and moral ideas. Death has the power to bring ideas to life in the living and therefore redirects attention on the audience who become instrumental in artworks.

Within the larger theme of death, this study will focus on how Hirst and Margolles are able to provoke an acutely human sense of disgust by presenting the material facts of death through the heightened and total experience of air art. It will show how disgust redirects attention to the audience and creates morally charged artworks. The controversial use of human and animal bodies challenge socio-consensual taboos, and Kieran Cashell’s 2009 book *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* makes an extensive exploration of contemporary art which has come to be described as ‘transgressive’ - that which “shocks only by virtue of its uncompromising mission to interrogate conservative views and subvert conventional moral beliefs.”⁷ Transgressive art is a direct attempt to challenge not just complacency, but habitual belief and whilst Cashell’s study could not possibly be rivalled the in the scope of this dissertation, it will be used as a platform to present Hirst and Margolles as purposeful and forceful participants in a contemporary narrative of disgust and controversy.

Whilst externally air-conditioning units appear to be commonplace machines performing simple, everyday functions, they paradoxically become the very mechanism of disgust and shock in these works. Consequently, Hirst and Margolles create two very different

⁵ R. Scott Bray, ‘En piel ajena: The work of Teresa Margolles,’ *Law Text Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2007), 15.

⁶ Brian Dillon, ‘Ugly Feelings,’ *Damien Hirst: Tate Modern Retrospective*, exh.cat. (Tate Publishing, 2012), 29.

⁷ Kieran Cashell, *Aftershock* (London, 2009), 1.

atmospheres in their work by controlling that very thing: the atmosphere. This three-part investigation of *In and Out of Love* and *Aire/Air* will begin by establishing how dematerialisation through air creates a phenomenological experience of disgust to undermine complacency and encourage closer engagement with the artworks. The second section will address how the inherently human foundations of this disgust provoke moral judgements and interpretations. Finally, the third section will suggest that disgust is experienced in paradoxical simultaneity to awe, as an embodiment of the ‘conceptual sublime,’ and will conclude that participants in *In and Out of Love* and *Aire/Air* may actually enjoy the experience of disgust.

1. Art of Air-Conditioning

Air is a basic necessity of human existence and yet, invisible to the naked eye, it is all too easy to forget it is there. For this reason, it represents a major complacency in everyday life. Thus, by re-presenting air as an artistic medium through air-conditioning units in an installation, Hirst and Margolles create multi-sensory artworks which challenge expectations of the gallery environment. Ralph Rugoff suggests that the creator of “invisible” art could disrupt “a complacency of seeing [because] when seeing just becomes a routine, it’s meaningless.”⁸ Far from meaningless, this chapter will explore how removing traditional art-objects such as painting and sculpture, and controlling the gallery environment through air-conditioning, is actually an attempt to create a hyper-reality; an experience that disgusts and engages through intensified multi-sensory perception. Redeploying the emphasis from a purely visual experience offers visitors the opportunity to engage in an extended consideration of the artwork without the ‘distractions’ of material objects. Air-conditioning encourages phenomenological perception where the audience are forced to reflect upon themselves and their own experiences. Thus, in adopting Cashell’s maxim that by assuming a moral analysis of art we invite ethical rather than aesthetic engagement,⁹ the air becomes the very means of generating disgust, moral judgement and consequently artistic meaning.

⁸ Ralph Rugoff, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8EeXM5USAU>> 6 January 2013 (0:15).

⁹ Cashell (2009), 12.

i) Dematerialisation

In 1968 in their article ‘The Dematerialisation of Art,’¹⁰ John Chandler and Lucy Lippard coined the term ‘dematerialisation’ to describe ultra-conceptual artworks. The expression has since been labelled by critics as both sweeping and ambiguous.¹¹ Despite this, it is a broad definition which will be applied here, since whilst the focus of this study will be on the immaterial air medium, neither Hirst’s nor Margolles’ installations are completely devoid of material objects. Lippard suggests that in conceptual art “idea is paramount and the material form is secondary”¹² which elevates the artist’s intentions over the interpretation of the viewer. This chapter will suggest, however, that the term ‘dematerialisation’ can also be applied to participatory and installation art, but with the result of equally elevating the role of both the artist *and* the audience, whose phenomenological experiences of disgust become integral to the ‘meaning’ of the artworks.

Significantly, Hirst’s and Margolles’ installations sit between the realms of conceptual and participatory art; in *Aire/Air*, disgust is generated by the mortuary theme and Margolles’ artistic origins in Mexico’s Forensic Medical Services (SEMEFO), a Mexico City artist collective who between 1990 and 1999 created artworks from forensic remains, exploring “biographies of the dead in relation to social, political and economic practices.”¹³ Yet audience participation is inherent to the installation, they animate the air by inhaling it, as

¹⁰ John Chandler and Lucy Lippard, ‘The Dematerialisation of Art,’ *Art International*, Vol.12 No.2 (February 1968), 31-36.

¹¹ Jacob Lillemoose discusses the appropriateness of the term and suggests its definition is disparate, uncertain and characterised by a lack of consensus in ‘Conceptual Transformations of Art: From Dematerialisation of the Object to Immateriality in Networks,’ J. Krysa (ed.), *Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems* (Autonomedia, 2006), 118. Rugoff describes the phrase as ‘sweeping’ in ‘How to Look at Invisible Art’ from the *Art About the Unseen, 1957-2012* exh.cat. (Hayward Publishing, 2012), 9.

¹² Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1977* (California, 1997), vii.

¹³ Scott Bray, 14.

well as pushing it about as they walk, thus lending it a new life. Aside from the gallery setting, little about Margolles' installation resembles traditional notions of art given that there are no canvases hung on the walls or guiding visual focus points. Contrarily, Hirst admits using large white canvases to subvert visitor expectations of the former Bankside Power Station and create a surreal environment- "I don't want the idea that the live butterflies came from somewhere,"¹⁴ which relocates attention from the canvases to the audience. Rather than containing painted representations of the world, butterfly chrysalises are stuck to canvases; they are not a plane on which life is represented, but one for life to emerge from.

Air-conditioning units force the audience to become part of the installation as they breathe and add to the room's atmosphere. These ostensibly banal machines which perform everyday functions recreate a reality within the art space, whilst simultaneously participating in a dematerialisation of art. As a result, the perceptual possibilities of immateriality juxtapose the air-conditioning units' simple functionality so that they represent a violation of rationality; air stimulates a full body experience whilst the units perform a basic and practical role. Atkinson and Baldwin propose through the very title of their article¹⁵ that concept art is bound between the subverting 'banality' of the empty room and the 'extravaganza' of what it represents; air-conditioning is for them a satirical embodiment of this absurdity. Air-conditioning in *In and Out of Love* performs the practical role of enabling the butterflies to hatch and stay alive, and yet at the same time it subverts our expectations of the serene gallery space. Similarly, the banality of air-conditioning in *Aire/Air* is amplified by the empty, clinical environment and yet completely destabilised by the grotesque truth of what the units are filling the room with.

¹⁴ Stuart Morgan, *Frieze, Issue 00* (Summer 1991). <<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/damien-hirst/>> 15 March 2013.

¹⁵ See footnote 3.

The water is contaminated, dirty and disgusting, which strongly contrasts with the idea that we use air-conditioning to create a comfortable living environment.

In fact, it is the realisation that Margolles' installation is filled with vaporised forensic remains, despite its outward appearance of banality, which disgusts viewers. It is unusual to think that an audience has a relationship of trust with an artist, and yet by removing visual clues of what the room contains, Margolles breaches what we might regard as a deeply human value, the sanctity of the body, to intensify our experience. We have been thrown into the artist's world of the mortuary and propelled into a moral dilemma. As Jacob Lillemose suggests, "By displacing the industrial materials from their usual functionalistic and rationalistic contexts, these artists set materiality in general free from the stable object and placed into fluid, fluctuating and expressive relations."¹⁶ Margolles displaces forensic material from the mortuary by bringing it into the gallery space, one which is traditionally regarded as a sanctuary and as a result shocks and disgusts her audience to undermine complacency and make a statement.

¹⁶ Lillemose, 123.

ii) Phenomenology and Participation

The air medium has the ability to redirect an audience's attention inwardly and to create an artwork of destabilising experience. By participating in Hirst's and Margolles' installations, visitors are enveloped, becoming a part of the art itself to provoke a simultaneous experience of surreal wonderment and inescapable disgust. For Claire Bishop, this ability in installation art to widen viewers' engagement with the world through direct participation, encourages an "active engagement in the social-political arena,"¹⁷ putting into effect the idea that *In and Out of Love* and *Aire/Air* encourage a deeply human and moral contemplation of death. Such an approach was encouraged by John Dewey who suggested in his 1934 book *Art As Experience* that there was a need for people to experience new things in order to develop as human beings.¹⁸ Dewey's emphasis on experience was echoed by the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty who argued in *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962, that perception involves the whole body, not just our vision, so that art may become invested with direct human experience.¹⁹ Dewey and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological studies look to the subjective experiences of the audience and complete sensory engagement, and a phenomenological approach to this investigation of Hirst and Margolles' installations will demonstrate that by transcending materiality through direct experience, the artists encourage deeply personal viewing responses.

In 1991, Felix Gonzalez-Torres began making his 'candy spills' such as *(Untitled) Placebo-Landscape-for Roni*, 1994, [Fig.4] which consisted of a rectangle of wrapped sweets which carpeted the gallery floor. Visitors were invited to each take a sweet so that the work gradually shrank, representing the disintegration of the artist's partner, Ross Laycock,

¹⁷ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (London, 2008), 11.

¹⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Van Rees Press, 1934), 19.

¹⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York, 2010), vii-xxiv.

through AIDS.²⁰ Just as his life had slowly been consumed by the disease, so the public were gradually consuming the installation. Bishop suggests that, caught between a public and private statement, there is eroticism in the act of consumption and quotes Gonzalez-Torres “I’m giving you this sugary thing; you put it in your mouth and you suck on someone else’s body. And in this way, my work becomes part of so many other people’s bodies.”²¹ Such a contradictory stance of lovingly honouring his partner whilst making a bold statement about AIDS in the gay community comparatively appears in *Aire/Air* which manifests the consequences of the drug war in Mexico through its victims’ bodies in both a commemorative and shocking way. At the same time as honouring the dead, Margolles makes a spectacle out of them; participation and phenomenological experience through consumption is therefore manifested in a much darker and more disgusting way, especially when we consider consumption as something erotic. Contrast the sweet treat with mortuary remains and we find two hugely contrasting commemorations of death, and yet both installations are socially engaged so that multi-sensory participation forces the audience’s bodies to become part of the installations and compelling an emotional response.

Whilst for Gonzalez-Torres, *(Untitled) Placebo-Landscape-for Roni* indicated the gradual coming to terms with his partner’s death as the sweets were taken away, Margolles arguably does the very opposite. For as well as inhaling the air, the audience also breathe it back into the room and correspondingly contribute to a continual regeneration. This is significant if we, like Scott Bray, regard Margolles’ art as a means of keeping a potent memory of the dead alive. Forensic remains are indicative of post-mortem identification; a process we often forget after the initial news story that takes place when a murder happens. The regeneration of such materials reminisces on the harsh realities of death and accepting Cashell’s suggestion that

²⁰ Bishop, 114.

²¹ Bishop, 115.

the dead only live on through the formative impact of death on the living,²² death becomes a tool for ethical exploration and education. Subjective phenomenological experience therefore sits hand-in-hand with the critical attitude to death which these installations encourage in the individual viewer.

Dewey suggests that life consists of phases when we, the organism, fall in and out of balance with the environment (we lack food, air or companionship) and we grow as people due to this fluctuation.²³ Rather than being starved of oxygen, however, it is presented to visitors to Hirst's and Margolles' installations in an enhanced state, which subsequently heightens awareness of the air that enables them to live. According to Dewey, when we have recovered from the experience we are not the same, supporting Cashell's notion that experiences of death can serve an educational function, and it is certainly difficult to forget the disgusting experiences of *Aire/Air* and *In and Out of Love*. Air is deployed to overwhelm so that disgust is experienced as a complete sensory attack. *In and Out of Love* literally carries the unpleasant smell of something we should avoid and often it is our sense of smell which warns us of something dangerous; for instance, food which has gone off or a hazardous chemical. The very particulars of death manifested in the sensory totality of the air invoke a potent sense of disgust and introduces a fear associated with rotting, death and decay.

²² Kieran Cashell, 'Ex Post Facto: Peirce and Living Signs of the Dead,' *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol.43, No.2 (Spring, 2007), 346.

²³ Dewey, 14.

iii) Manufacturing a reality

A phenomenological approach tells us that complete sensory engagement draws on memory and past experience, subsequently enabling a more real and subjective form of perception. Accordingly, the air-filled, dematerialised room allows the artists to manufacture a hyper-reality which the audience experience as a total artwork. Mark Zimmermann points out that “Certainly it’s easier to watch the news than write a novel”²⁴ and in a way, Hirst and Margolles simply re-present an existing reality. However, they submerge the audience in the disgusting realities of death, allowing the installations to function as both controversial artworks and provocations for an ethical response. Thus, Margolles recreates a mortuary to overthrow expectation as well as relay the life of an unclaimed corpse whilst Hirst’s real tropical microcosm subverts complacent experience of the stagnant gallery by merging art with life. Constructing an intense and charged reality therefore allows these artists to undermine everyday experience, and create socially charged environments.

Installation artist Robert Irwin suggested that participation in the empty gallery space allows the viewer to structure “a new state of real” which put them in an ethical position.²⁵ Indeed, air art engulfs and permeates the skin so that the audience experience real inescapable disgust whilst the lack of a visual material allows for extended contemplation of the total artwork. Air-conditioning units continually replenish the air so that the audience themselves are contained within an eerie life-support machine. In *Aire/Air* the presentation of the corpse through vaporised forensic remains creates an actual reality of death and threatens the sanctity of life, for just as the air keeps the visitor alive, it contaminates and disgusts. In an interview with critic Waldemar Januszczak, Margolles suggests that mortality figures linked to

²⁴ Mark Zimmerman, ‘No Sense of Absolute Rebellion,’ *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (September, 1996), 51.

²⁵ Bishop, 57.

the Mexican drug war are not published by the government, but the media, and questions “who is counting?”²⁶ The continual output of forensic remains is thus reflective of the unreported deaths and unidentified bodies in mortuaries; Margolles is entrenching the ‘unseen’ realities of life through absence in the invisible air medium. As a result, *Aire/Air* presents a disgusting reality and withdraws from conventional representation to unreservedly “recall the now absent body via smell and the fundamental *matter* of death decomposed.”²⁷

On the other hand, Hirst renders the audience complicit in the artwork’s reality; life and death becomes a spectacle and the audience are part of his phenomenon, which is as much about modern culture as it is the simple verity of life and death.²⁸ Visitors may even participate in the early demise of the butterflies, given that many were killed when brushed off clothes or accidentally stepped on, and this level of real interaction and instrumentation elevates the idea that an audience are afforded a power by their role in participatory art to an unnerving new level. The popularity of Hirst’s retrospective meant that visitors queued outside the installation before being systematically herded in and out of the room as quickly as they fell ‘in and out of love’ with artwork; initial wonderment at the butterflies was quickly replaced with disgust. Not only are they artificially kept alive through air-conditioning and made drunk on bowls of ripe fruit, but the exhibition includes staff to pick up butterflies which have either died or become disorientated, and fallen on the floor. The title ‘*In and Out of Love*’ symbolises the transience of life as well as the rapidly updating complacencies of modern culture where the artist has to make increasingly bold statements to shock the audience. However, the clichéd emblem for life and death in the butterfly is the perfect platform from which Hirst can deliver his spectacle; perhaps we need to be starkly presented with an everyday reality in order to properly realise it. Accordingly, Dewey suggests that a

²⁶ Teresa Margolles, < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtLcedTTIBc> > 1 March 2013 (3:06).

²⁷ Scott Bray, 17.

²⁸ Dillon suggests that we know Hirst intends to shock and we willingly buy into the spectacle, 22.

philosophy of art should seek to explain how the function of art differs from ordinary experience,²⁹ and by creating a hyper-reality, an intense presentation of something real and commonplace, Hirst elevates his installation beyond ordinary experience to encourage self-reflection, whilst retaining uncanny ties with the reality of life. Opposition from groups such as the RSPCA and PETA³⁰ condemned Hirst, whilst he invites the audience to enter, making them complicit in the disgusting art he creates; reality has become a platform for judgement and blame.

For Margolles, the involvement of the public has been a prevalent feature throughout her career; for the 2009 Venice Biennale she employed relatives of victims of the Mexican drug war to mop the floors of the Mexican pavilion with a mixture of their blood and water [Fig.5]. The solution was absorbed into the floor so that visitors interacted simply by walking around the building. Her audience, like Hirst's, are instrumental in the reality she manufactures, and yet their involvement exists on a very different level. Walking through the blood of murder victims does not seem respectful and yet the unrestricted art-space imposes emotional engagement through total phenomenological perception. Where Margolles invites real participation through touch, smell and sight, *Aire/Air* is typical of Margolles' artistic career, whilst for Hirst *In and Out of Love* represents an anomaly, as the next section will go on to discuss.

²⁹ Dewey, 12.

³⁰ The RSPCA criticised Hirst when figures obtained from the Tate revealed that more than 9,000 butterflies died in the course of the exhibition; the species which live up to nine months in the wild often only lasted days. Similar criticisms were made by PETA and the Butterfly Conservation Trust: Roya Nikkah <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/9606498/Damien-Hirst-condemned-for-killing-9000-butterflies-in-Tate-show.html>>. 7 December 2012

iv) A Power Struggle

Dillon argues that “no artist has in recent decades been so determined and daring in deploying the vitrine as Hirst”³¹ and by presenting death within a glass container, Hirst provokes fascination so that rather than being disgusted, the audience are made “to feel distinctly uncomfortable about feeling comfortable in the face of death.”³² A sense of inaccessibility has characterised Hirst’s vitrine work; animals preserved in formaldehyde in *Mother and Child Divided*, 1993; cabinets displaying meticulously arranged medical instrument in *Invasion*, 2009; and a glass box containing a desk with an ash tray on in *The Acquired Inability to Escape*, 1991 [Figs.6, 7 and 8]. The vitrine symbolises both a physical barrier obstructing the body and exhibiting the artwork as a scientific experiment, as well as an emotional barrier which estranges the audience from his unnervingly honest subjects. Synonymous of Hirst’s alienating dramatic gestures, the glass barrier has held the audience at a distance whilst *In and Out of Love* invites them into his world; they become Hirst’s latest experiment.

However, by doing so Hirst muddies the relationship of power between artist and audience. In a review published in 1992, in the early stages of what was to become an obsessive period of using the vitrine, Richard Shone suggested that “the pane is acting as a frame...to cool the spectators’ gaze”³³ and thus, the disgusting fact of, for instance, animals sliced in half [Fig.6], is estranged and placed at a safe distance from the audience’s emotions. The frame affords the viewer control by directing their gaze and separating them from the artist’s grisly art. *In and Out of Love* provides no such refuge, handing power to the artist to shock and disgust the audience.

³¹ Dillon, 23.

³² Dillon, 24.

³³ Richard Shone, ‘Review: Damien Hirst. London, ICA Gallery,’ *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 134, No. 1068 (March, 1992), 198.

This relationship between viewer and installation art is underpinned by two ideas according to Bishop: that of ‘activating’ and ‘decentering’ the viewing subject.³⁴ Direct participation in installations such as *In and Out of Love* and *Aire/Air* activates the viewer and Bishop suggests the heightened level of perception this enables is emancipatory,³⁵ so that the removal of the glass cabinet represents a liberation which relocates power to the audience. However, the viewer is also ‘decentered,’ meaning that they are denied one real or ideal place from which to view the art. If Erwin Panofsky’s *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 1924, placed the viewer of Renaissance perspective at the centre and in control of the ‘gaze,’³⁶ then the air medium undermines the audience’s perceptive control because it denies a visual focus. Whilst Panofsky suggests that centred perspective is a “bold abstraction from reality” by assuming “first, that we see with a single and immobile eye, and second, that the planar cross section of the visual pyramid can pass for an adequate reproduction of our optical image,”³⁷ air remains invisible to the naked eye; we can move within it and push it around and yet the artworks are not figuratively tangible and optically destabilising. Rather than liberating the audience, multi-perspectives cause them to lose control and so the power is subsequently handed back to the artist. Whilst decentering has been used in art criticism alongside feminist and post-colonial theory to subvert “masculinist, racist and conservative”³⁸ ideology’s idea that there was a ‘right’ way of perceiving the world, decentering liberates the participants only to leave them in a maze of perceptual possibilities.

³⁴ Bishop, 11.

³⁵ Bishop, 11.

³⁶ Panofsky, Erwin, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, (Trans.) Christopher S. Wood (New York, 1991), in ‘Section I’ Panofsky offers the idea that “central perspective” centred on the vanishing point is an infinite, functional and homogenous way of representing reality rather than our “actual subjective optical impression” of the world, 29. In ‘Sections II, III and IV’ Panofsky applies this idea to the art of antiquity, exploring the relevance of a centralised view point in religious art.

³⁷ Panofsky, 29.

³⁸ Bishop, 13.

In and Out of Love therefore represents a complex power struggle which is not easy to resolve. It creates anxious tension in the audience, subverting complacency in order to provoke a more engaged response. The perceptual struggle consequently becomes tantamount to the controversial nature of the artworks themselves; the disgusting presentation of death is supported by a disturbing perceptual experience. *Aire/Air* and *In and Out of Love* remove an ideal viewing point for the audience, which would otherwise introduce an element of harmony. Yet the artists are not presenting us with something harmonic or ideal; the corpse of a murder victim calls for a harsh and dislocating presentation which makes the audience feel powerless and anxious. The power that artists hold over the spectator consequently serves a dramatic purpose in art whilst at the same time the artwork which seeks to provoke a moral response relies on phenomenological interaction which affords power back to the participant. Controversy and the way that people react to provocative subject matter are important features of socially charged artworks which raises the question: without an audience and their emotional responses, would there be an artwork at all?

2. Disgust: Making Art out of Death

Through direct participation, Hirst's and Margolles' installations provoke a disgust which is manifested in ethical and moral uncertainties. Whether authority rests with the artist who can 'play' with the audience's emotions, or the audience who are empowered by their direct engagement, the simultaneously immersive and subversive experiences also arouse a paradoxical sense of wonderment. As a result, participants are forced into a complex position of outrage at the material fact of the artwork, whilst experiencing a thrilled wonder at such purposeful provocation. This section will examine the nature of disgust and question what purpose, if any, it serves in Hirst's and Margolles' art.

Disgust and awe are instinctive emotional responses which lie at the core of phenomenological theory as 'true' perception, but what importance does the visceral reaction of disgust hold in relation to ethical questions raised by *Aire/Air* and *In and Out of Love*? Bioethicist Leon Kass suggests in his provocative article, 'The Wisdom of Repugnance,' that "repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom" and that we are repelled by things "because we feel, immediately and without argument, the violation of things we rightfully hold dear."³⁹ Kass' concern lies in biological ethical issues such as cloning and euthanasia, and whilst his theories have been ridiculed for promoting unscientific emotional reactions,⁴⁰ his ideas are significant given the artists' use of human and animal bodies as artistic signifiers rather than scientific mediums.

³⁹ Gregory E. Kaebnick, 'Reasons of the Heart: Emotion, Rationality and the "Wisdom of Repugnance",' *The Hastings Centre Report*, Vol. 38, No.4 (July-August, 2008), 36.

⁴⁰ Kaebnick agrees with Kass to the extent that moral judgements on bioethical matters depend on how we respond emotionally to the world around us. However, he does not agree wholly with Kass' 'Wisdom of Repugnance' and cites C. Mooney, 'Irrationalist in Chief,' *The American Prospect* Vol. 12, No. 2 (2001), 10-12 as a principle proponent against Kass.

Disgust lies in Margolles' use of forensic remains and Hirst's manipulation of dead and dying animals, and the biological act of breathing allows these mediums to permeate the body so that the audience too are manipulated, further intensifying the violation. This direct handling of death does not seem surprising considering Margolles' diploma in Forensic Sciences and membership of SEMEFO. Similarly Hirst, during his time studying art at Goldsmiths, made extensive studies of dead bodies at a morgue.⁴¹ Margolles provokes debate regarding whether it is either respectful or commemorative to articulate actual death through the spectacle of an art exhibition. Hirst similarly incites questions about the ethics of using live insects, especially when habitation in the gallery inevitably shortens their lives.⁴² An unsettling mausoleum follows in the next chapter of his installation: *In and Out of Love (Butterfly Paintings and Ashtrays)*, 1991 [Fig.9]. At its original exhibition, the second instalment was created alongside *In and Out of Love (White Paintings with Live Butterflies)* so that as soon as butterflies died, they were taken to another room and pasted onto brightly coloured canvases. This created disparity between the animated spectacle of death through air-conditioning and the garish yet macabre commemoration through the canvas, so that that a disgusting and controversial re-presentation of death serves to question how death is perceived in the eyes of the living.

Whilst notoriously criticised for his use of animals, Hirst has never employed the human body as Margolles has done and yet Una Chaudhuri suggests that in the face of animals we are presented with our own humanity.⁴³ The fact that we keep them as pets distinguishes us as a caring society and the display of dead animals in art subsequently encourages the

⁴¹ Dillon, 22.

⁴² See footnote 28.

⁴³ Una Chaudhuri, '(De)Facing Animals: Zooësis and Performance,' *TDR, Vol. 58, No.1* (Spring, 2007), 14.

audience to redirect ethical questions inwardly.⁴⁴ Whilst we cannot exactly look into the face of a butterfly, steps taken to protect them from endangerment are undermined in the two-part *In and Out of Love* artwork. When questioned on whether he would ever preserve a human body in formaldehyde, Hirst suggested that it didn't have the same sort of meaning- "In England people feel more for animals than they do with people,"⁴⁵ signifying an art which deliberately sets out to challenge human sensibilities via their reactions to death in other living things. Whilst Dillon divides his essay, 'Ugly Feelings,' into four comprehensive sections: shock, curiosity, disgust, and hypochondria, to address divergent reactions to Hirst's work,⁴⁶ this section will distinguish disgust in Hirst's and Margolles' installations as a deeply human response to fundamental questions regarding human nature. It will question the artistic intentions behind disgust and place Hirst's and Margolles' installations within a narrative of controversy.

⁴⁴ Chaudhuri, 14.

⁴⁵ Hirst, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rESmxFXAd8>> 6 January 2013 (9:25).

⁴⁶ Dillon, 21-29.

i) **An Artist's Ethics**

Through humidified forensic remains, Scott Bray suggests Margolles gives 'life' to the corpse:

*With death, the body continues into another phase that is contingent upon the social, political and economic context of life pre-death. Here, forensic 'facts' of death, such as cause and circumstance of injury and death, the age of the deceased et cetera, which are so important in legal processes including registration of deaths and coronial findings, become additional notes in on going memoirs. These particular adjuncts are part of a larger framing of the life of the death of those who arrive at the mortuary as victims of violence, people who are unknown or unclaimed. The aim of this biographical writing is to obliterate the easy maxim 'death is the great equaliser.'*⁴⁷

Rather than a simple act of memorial, Margolles exhibits the facts of death to give life to her morally charged installation with the intention of provoking an ethical response in the viewer. Forensic remains are a charged biographical tool which symbolise Mexico's flawed political and social system, whilst the invisible air medium reinforces the idea that in death, marginalised members of society are quickly forgotten. Breathing in the humidified water is considered disgusting and its vulgarity symbolises how not all deaths receive a respectful commemoration, yet it is through the very act of breathing that forgotten lives are remembered, and moral questions awakened. Therefore, just as Margolles seeks to raise moral issues regarding failing social practices, we may simultaneously challenge the ethics of the installation itself, creating a two-fold ethical dilemma. The use of human remains is undoubtedly controversial; whilst some of the bodies are unidentified victims of the narcotics

⁴⁷ Scott Bray, 15-16.

war, often families simply cannot afford to bury their loved ones.⁴⁸ Does the artist take advantage of these families in order to create a spectacle? Margolles clearly intends to challenge complacency, if not offend with her art so that the audience are involuntarily thrust into an ethical judgement of both immediate and signified experience.

If Margolles' motives are political, Hirst's are far less clear. A popular criticism is presented by Jennifer Higgie when she proposes that Hirst "seems to assume that by revealing something's guts you can glimpse its heart,"⁴⁹ whilst Ann Gallagher contrarily argues that his work encourages an "uncompromising exploration of the fragility of existence."⁵⁰ This tension between brutality and delicacy mirrors the paradoxically disgusting yet awe-inspiring nature of *In and Out of Love*. The exotic beauty of the butterflies is undermined by the artificial environment so that moral questions relate to the transience of life and what we could regard as the internal 'meaning' of the artwork, as well as the external controversy the installation generates through the use of living butterflies. Accordingly, Dillon suggests that Hirst's special brand of shock can be divided into two: 'moral-aesthetic disapproval' which asserts that Hirst is not even making art, and the more complex 'out to shock' concept- "Hirst, we're told, wants to shock, but such is the expectation that this is what an artist of his generation, temperament and position wishes to do, that the work is not really shocking at all."⁵¹ However, as we have already seen, Hirst breaks from his own conventions so that visitors prepared to complacently view dead animals from behind the glass barrier are unexpectedly submerged. What seems more likely is that by "revealing an animal's guts,"

⁴⁸ Margolles, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEO_1yYcFJ4> 1 April 2013 (10:20).

⁴⁹ Jennifer Higgie, *Frieze, Issue 148* (June-August, 2012). <<http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/damien-hirst/>> 10 April 2013.

⁵⁰ Ann Gallagher, 'Introduction,' *Damien Hirst: Tate Modern Retrospective*, exh.cat. (Tate Publishing, 2012), 11.

⁵¹ Dillon, 22.

Hirst is redirecting attention towards the audience and their own capabilities for destruction so that they are now practitioners in his disgusting art. Rather than existing in nature, the living being is now displayed as art; something that is consumed as a material object, but that can also be formative. Therefore, whilst Margolles uses disgust to manifest social and political ideas, Hirst encourages self-reflection and makes the audience instrumental in the creation of disgust. Despite these differences, *Aire/Air* and *In and Out of Love* are underlined by the debate raised by an artwork that deliberately sets out to challenge morals. This leads us to question: how effective is disgust as an ethically explorative tool?

ii) 'The Shit Worked'

Mary Devereaux explores the relationship between art, politics and autonomy in her article 'Protected Space: Politics, Censorship and the Arts' to suggest that looking at art as political conceptions not only enriches our understanding of the artwork, but there is "increased potential for art to arouse controversy and engage widespread interest."⁵² Thus, when in 1989 New York State senator, Al d'Amato, publicly defaced a reproduction of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, 1987 [Fig.10], a photograph of a crucifix suspended in urine, he marked the start of a long debate over whether artists should be allowed to make images which will ultimately offend the public, regardless of their artistic intentions. Is it morally justifiable for Hirst to use exotic butterflies or Margolles use mortuary remains in order to controversially explore social taboos about death? Controversy surrounding Serrano's photograph escalated to a point at a rate that even he could not have foreseen and yet without it, he would not have become as well known an artist. Such can certainly be said of Hirst whose notoriety for preserving animals in formaldehyde has created a highly profitable brand of shock, so that offending human sensibilities could be regarded as his means to an end.⁵³

In a paradoxical twist, d'Amato met what he regarded as defamation of a sacred image with his own defamation of the artwork. It created a dialogue between artist and society, and between statement and offence, which ultimately afforded the image greater publicity, caused wider offence and attributed the artwork greater progressive significance. Akin to the suffragette, Mary Richardson, slashing Diego Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus*, c.1647-51,⁵⁴

⁵² Mary Devereaux, 'Protected Space: Politics, Censorship and the Arts,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 51, No. 2, *Aesthetics: Past Criticism and the American Society for Aesthetics* (Spring, 1993), 211.

⁵³ Dillon, 22.

⁵⁴ On 10th March, 1914, Mary Richardson slashed Velázquez's painting in protest against the arrest of Emmeline Pankhurst: "I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest

[Figs.11 and 12] d'Amato made a clear political statement by tearing Serrano's photograph so that the public re-evaluation of what was acceptable in art became the very significance of the work. The artist can as a result not only challenge society's complacency, but also test the limits to which it can be pushed. For Margolles this was manifested in the desire to raise awareness of a hidden injustice, whilst Hirst uses dead and dying animals to create a slightly assuaged mirror of the facts of our own morality and mortality.

It is difficult to regard Serrano's photograph as anything but deliberately provocative and Anthony Fisher and Hayden Ramsay in their article 'Of Art and Blasphemy' argue that the artist's incontestable blasphemy was a means to an end.⁵⁵ Their claim is not unproblematic, for whilst on the one hand they argue that blasphemy is primarily a moral rather than religious concept and therefore widening their argument, they do not acknowledge a meaning to the photograph beyond deliberate offence. They eliminate the possibility that controversy can serve a progressive social function. An adherent of this latter idea is Devereaux who campaigns for the protection of controversial artworks which she believes to have social value *because* they challenge established notions.⁵⁶ Therefore, whilst it may be wrong to pointlessly cause offence, disgust in *Aire/Air* counters the notion that death is the great equaliser and draws attention to an injustice. On the other hand, Hirst controversially places his audience in the midst of a real life life-cycle in order to make a brazen statement on the ephemerality fashions of modern life, and as we question whether he is justified in using the live medium, we simultaneously question our own involvement and enjoyment of the

against the Government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history," Gridley McKim- Smith, 'The Rhetoric or Rape, the Language of Vandalism,' *Women's Art Journal*, Vol.23, No.1 (Spring-Summer 2002), 31.

⁵⁵ Anthony Fisher and Hayden Ramsay, 'Of Art and Blasphemy,' *Ethical Theory and Modern Practice*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (June, 2000), 138-141.

⁵⁶ Devereaux, 214.

artwork. Disgust challenges the limits of their autonomy as artists as well as the boundaries of what is acceptable in art and society.

Art need not, of course, have a social purpose, but Serrano demonstrated that shocking art 'works' and it is significant that Hirst's and Margolles' installations are perhaps only able to shock to the extent they do *because* they are art. Hirst exemplified this point by suggesting that people accept flies being killed in a restaurant but take issue if their death is used to make a statement in art,⁵⁷ and whether artists intend it or not, art exists as a social testimonial. Perhaps animals represent something sacred which should be protected, just as Fisher and Ramsay demand for the crucifix, in order to preserve human morality and Hirst is for that reason participating in an unavoidable social narrative. We can again refer to Cashell who celebrates of transgressive art's ability to challenge creative boundaries treads a fine line with the criticism that it can go 'too far' in violating putative artistic culture, making it difficult to engage with such works as art.⁵⁸

A similar controversy surrounding what was regarded as the defamation of a sacred symbol followed Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996 [Fig.13]. The debate whether artists should be allowed to deploy sacred symbols as they see fit, even if it compromises the status of the work as 'art,' was challenged by Ofili who alternatively lampooned people who were offended by their own analyses- "The people who are attacking this painting are attacking their own interpretation, not mine."⁵⁹ This is another example of a complex power struggle between artistic intention and audience interpretation, but ultimately, controversy can only be gauged by audience reactions, especially in the morally charged installations of Hirst and

⁵⁷ Hirst, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rESmxFXAd8>> 6 January 2013 (5:50)

⁵⁸ Cashell (2009), 1-15.

⁵⁹ Donald J. Cosentino, 'Hip-Hop Assemblage: The Chris Ofili Affair,' *African Arts*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Spring, 2000), 43.

Margolles which rely on human engagement. Aside from the application of elephant dung to the holy figure, a principle point of contention in Ofili's icon was the collaged clippings from porn magazines. Intimately focused nude photographs at a distance resemble butterflies hovering around the sacred figure so that it encourages a comparison with canvases produced in *In and Out of Love (Butterfly Paintings with Ashtrays)* [Fig.14], and yet closer inspection reveals the crude actuality. Both represent provocative moral issues, pornography and the exploitation of animals, suspended on the canvas and presented as emblems of beauty, and whether the artists intended to offend or not, as Donald J. Cosentino suggested of Ofili's dung painting, 'The shit worked.'⁶⁰

⁶⁰Cosentino, 43.

iii) Beyond Controversy

Disgust is an effective tool for generating debate but it can also serve an artistic purpose beyond the creation of spectacle. Through blood and urine, Jerry D. Meyer suggests that Serrano was sacralising “anew bodily fluids identified with aspects of suffering and martyrdom for redemptive cause.”⁶¹ Whilst urinating on a sacred object “would be a sacrilege in almost any culture or religion,”⁶² the humanising of Christ by emphasising his physical suffering as a mortal man has long been an aim of crucifixion images.⁶³ For Margolles, presenting the body through the vaporised water that washed it highlights the fact that many bodies which enter the mortuary do not have an identity until the autopsy has taken place, just as the visitor to *Aire/Air* may not fully comprehend the apparently empty room until they have participated with the invisible medium. They are not given a choice to participate until it is too late.

Urine and blood in *Piss Christ* has therefore been transfigured by religious imagery so that it inhabits “an uncomfortably ambivalent realm between profane and sacred art,”⁶⁴ just as *Aire/Air* is at once commemorative and exploitative. Serrano attributed this paradox to “unresolved feelings about my own Catholic upbringing which helped me redefine and personalise my relationship with God”⁶⁵ and so disgust consequently reflects his personal exploration of spiritual uncertainties, away from the public spectacle it created. The ideas behind *Piss Christ* can be seen to resonate strongly with Margolles’ installation since

⁶¹ Jerry D. Meyer, ‘Profane and Sacred: Religious Imagery and Prophetic Expression in Post Modern Art,’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 65, No., 1 (Spring, 1997), 20.

⁶² Fisher and Ramsay, 140.

⁶³ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “‘To Make Women Weep’ Ugly art as ‘feminine’ and the origins of modern aesthetics,’ *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 31, *The Object* (Spring 1997), 15.

⁶⁴ Meyer, 24.

⁶⁵ Lucy Lippard, ‘Andres Serrano: The Spirit and the Letter,’ *Art in America*, 78 (April), 239, quoted in Meyer, 24.

Serrano's life growing up involved both drug addiction and drug dealing. He was drawn to 'unacceptable' subject matter "because I lived an unacceptable life for so long"⁶⁶ and it is therefore significant that Margolles who has first-hand experience of the Mexican drug war through her work at a mortuary also chose to manifest unsettling ideas of unclaimed bodies through bodily fluids.

Meyer proposes that bodily fluids and the use of Christian imagery in the 1980s and 1990s became a medium through which artists could express 'apocalyptic' social issues such as pollution and AIDS, and Margolles renews this idea to represent the devastation caused by the narcotics war in Mexico. Disgust is inherent to her deeply personal messages about humanity, and human remains force the audience to confront the artworks with a deep human engagement. Both in a religious and secular context, bodily fluids refer to human suffering and therefore have the power to criticise relevant aspects of society; disgust such a material inevitably generates can therefore communicate deeply human ideas. In accordance with Kass' 'wisdom of repugnance,' moral reactions to disgusting images should not therefore be ignored; the debate surrounding an artwork can be just as significant as the artistic 'meaning' of the work itself as a signifier of what is acceptable in society and what is not. As we have seen, this test can be applied to both the work of art itself and what it represents.

It may be interesting at this point to refer to Sara Lipton's article 'The Sweet Lean of His Head: Writing about Looking at the Crucifix in the High Middle Ages,' and John Munns' reflective response, 'The eye of the beholder? Beauty and ugliness in crucifixion imagery of the late Middle Ages.' For Lipton, a medieval audience's viewing of gruesome crucifixion images needed to be guided by the texts they read and words they heard in order to find the beauty they sought in Christ, just as we find meaning in the debates surrounding provocative

⁶⁶ Andres Serrano, *Andres Serrano: Works 1983-1993* (Philadelphia, 1994), 14, quoted in Meyer, 29.

artworks. For Munns however, the power of art to disturb and confuse by “forcefully asserting the incommensurability of ugliness and abjection with divinity”⁶⁷ was not a problem to be resolved but a “mystery to be entered into.”⁶⁸ The paradoxical awe and wonderment experienced by the visitor of *In and Out of Love* need not therefore be explained as a deliberate commentary on life or death; perhaps the unnerving ambivalence of the work is enough to create a highly personal experience. Jeffrey F. Hamburger argues in line with Munns that it is the ugly elements of crucifixion imagery which could have the biggest impact and create a lasting memory, for “To sheer force of expression, the abject can add nuance and articulation.”⁶⁹ Disgust in medieval imagery could for that reason transcend ‘expressive’ modes of representation and make images of deeper human resonance, and these ideas can certainly be applied to our modern, morally explorative installations.

⁶⁷ Lipton, “‘The Sweet Lean of His Head’: Writing about Looking at the Crucifix in the High Middle Ages,’ *Spectrum*, Vol.80, No.4 (2005), 1181.

⁶⁸ John Munns, ‘The eye of the beholder? Beauty and ugliness in the crucifixion imagery of the late Middle Ages’, *Theology*, 114:419 (2011), 419.

⁶⁹ Hamburger, 12.

3. Disgust: The Conceptual Sublime

Dillon suggests that disgust is the most ambiguous emotional response to Hirst's work because, in accordance with Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, 1790, it disqualifies the object from being art at all:

There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic liking and hence artistic beauty: that ugliness which arouses disgust. For in that strange sensation, resting on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting; and hence the artistic presentation is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of this object itself, so that it cannot possibly be considered beautiful.⁷⁰

Kant was arguing that if the concept behind the artwork was disgusting then we cannot make an aesthetic judgement because it must be beautiful in order to be considered art. Similar criticism lies in the transgressive nature of *In and Out of Love* and *Aire/Air* which can go too far in violating accepted culture so that they are no longer considered art.⁷¹ There was, however, one exception to Kant's rule and that was the sublime: the concept that we *can* be attracted to something disgusting, provided that we are safe from the danger it represents. The primary limitation of Kant's theories for this study's purposes is that he is ultimately concerned with aesthetic judgements, whilst the focus here lies in the phenomenological experience of air art. The nature of conceptual and participatory art redirects aesthetic judgement to the simultaneity of complete human experience. Whilst we might enjoy the aesthetics of the exotic and colourful butterflies in *In and Out of Love*, their clichéd

⁷⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987), 180, quoted in Dillon, 25.

⁷¹ Cashell (2009), 1.

symbolism removes any deliberate attempt to use them as a purely visual focus whilst *Aire/Air* rejects visual stimuli almost altogether. Nevertheless, the simultaneously disgusting and awe-inspiring experience of Hirst's and Margolles' installations can be regarded as an embodiment of the sublime. The total experience of disgust actually represents the next stage in sublime theory which we will call the 'conceptual sublime,' which is contingent on complete, boundless experience of the air medium, as well as engagement through obscenity rather than aesthetic beauty, to counteract disinterested contemplation.

Robert Rosenblum's essay 'The Abstract Sublime'⁷² goes some way towards breaching the gap between Kant's sublime aesthetics and the conceptual sublime experience of *In and Out of Love* and *Aire/Air*. For Rosenblum, the sublime is found in the boundlessness of Abstract Expressionist art, so that whilst Kant was concerned with looking at paintings, Rosenblum opened up the concept to consider the painting's 'presence' in a space and its impression on the audience. As installations, *Aire/Air* and *In and Out of Love* transcend the limitations of the picture plane yet attempt to relay similar ideas through sublime experience. Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757, became the basis for Romantic painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to relay through nature "imprecise and irrational[...]ideas of awe, terror and boundlessness";⁷³ such irrational ideas are relayed in Hirst's and Margolles' installations which attempt to rationalise deeply unnerving ideas about the nature of death through sublime experience of the natural phenomenon itself.

Sublime theory rests on three components: the suggestion of danger or immense power through subject matter, scale and vastness; the barrier protecting us from this danger; and the

⁷² Robert Rosenblum, 'The Abstract Sublime,' in Henry Geldzahler, *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970* (London, 1969), 350-359.

⁷³ Rosenblum, 350.

thrill created by our proximity to such immensity. Rosenblum connects James Ward's landscape painting *Gordale Scar*, 1822-15, [Fig.15] which embodies Burke's assertion that "Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime"⁷⁴ and Clyfford Still's Abstract Expressionist painting *1957-D No. 1*, 1957, [Fig.16] to illustrate how "dumbfounding size" could "paralyze the spectator's traditional habits of seeing and thinking."⁷⁵ Scale and vastness therefore has the ability to hugely undermine audience complacency and this is embodied in the infinite air medium which pervades the senses so that visitors are not only viewing boundlessness, but also participating within it.

In 1964, Mark Rothko was commissioned to design the interior of a non-denominational, yet spiritual building which came to be known as the *Rothko Chapel* [Fig.17]. The octagonal structure, most commonly used for baptisteries and tombs, was designed to enwomb the viewer and three triptychs and five single paintings which stretch almost from floor to ceiling and are painted black, engage the space in a contemplative and spiritual narrative. The sheer size and pulsating form of Rothko's paintings redirect focus from their painterly surface to the audiences' experience, creating as Rosenblum saw it, the Abstract Sublime. Ward's and Still's paintings are large, 333 x 422 cm and 312 x 404 cm respectively, so that the viewer is almost completely enveloped. Rothko's chapel then represents a step further towards complete experience.

In and Out of Love is similarly composed of a room decorated with non-figurative white canvases which enclose the visitor to create the boundless artwork. However, the immensity of the air medium is then reflected in the immensity of the theme of death, so that sublime experience is founded in both sensory physicality and deeper psychological thought, leading us to a 'conceptually sublime' experience. Similarly, *Aire/Air* represents the overlooked

⁷⁴ Rosenblum, 350.

⁷⁵ Rosenblum, 351.

realities of death in the mind of the living. Eerie emptiness reflects the unnerving and morally troubling subject matter so that sublime experience is actually bound in the concept behind the artwork.

Moreover, the 'conceptual sublime' is also manifested in the status of *Aire/Air* and *In and Out of Love* as modern transgressive artworks. Cashell suggests that contemporary culture carries a burden to make possible experiences of safe "abandonment and excess" and "to give (at least vicarious) expression to the impulsive attraction to the instinctual urge towards the amoral and the irrational."⁷⁶ Thus, it is the ability of these artworks to disgust and offend which creates such powerful and sublime experience. If the role of the artist is no longer to make 'beautiful' art which fosters disinterested viewing, but to create spectacles which undermine audience complacency and generate publicity through debate, then the sublime is the vehicle through which they can do so without entirely alienating the audience. Disgust enables a sublime experience and penetrating contemplation of death because it is close enough to be thrilling, whilst still retaining an element of separation. Perhaps then, we are not just disgusted by the installations but by our own enjoyment of them.

For Burke and Rosenblum, the picture plane represented a protective barrier, separating the audience from dangerous or disgusting subjects. However, we have already discussed how removing the vitrine in Hirst's work undermined audience expectations of their perceived 'safety' from grotesque artworks and how Margolles tears down the barrier hiding the true facts of post-mortem existence. Do *Aire/Air* and *In and Out of Love* therefore adhere to the notion that we can only be thrilled by a danger that we are ultimately safe from? The audience are not 'protected' from the artwork when they inhale it, and yet at the same time, the visitor to *Aire/Air* is not actually in a mortuary and Hirst's macabre approach does not involve the

⁷⁶ Cashell (2009), 2.

use of human bodies to relay his ideas, but insects through which we perceive a mirror image. Air-conditioning is therefore significant because it acts as a potent *suggestion* of the installations' dark themes so that the audience can experience disgust through sublime awe, and actually enjoy the disgusting experience.

Hirst's and Margolles' installations consequently push the limits of the sublime closer to an experience of actual danger and yet retain the 'safety' of the gallery space. On the brink between actual involvement with death and manufactured illusion, the air's ambiguity contributes to the creation of paradoxical wonderment and disgust, and the audience's uneasy enjoyment of disturbing subjects. Just as Munns saw the potential in crucifixion imagery to convey the mysteries of Christ via a simultaneously ugly and beautiful art, so the sublime thrills the audience by their safe yet proximate perception of danger. Whilst *Aire/Air* carries serious social messages about the Mexican narcotics war, it is difficult not to be thrilled by the experience which presents something so removed from the banality of everyday experience. Indeed, when Dillon suggests that visitors to Hirst's retrospective were *expecting* to be shocked, he makes a strong case in line with Kant's notion of enjoying something we are "forcefully resisting:" the idea that people are thrilled and find entertainment in that which disgusts them.

Conclusions

The general shift in agenda when looking at art from the question “is this beautiful?” to “is this art?” is profoundly manifested in Teresa Margolles’ *Aire/Air* and Damien Hirst’s *In and Out of Love* which unconventionally use air-conditioning to provoke ethical rather than aesthetic judgements. The air medium represents a dematerialisation from the traditional art-object, ultimately encouraging a total and phenomenological perception of the installations which the audience can enter and participate within. Audience interpretations become paramount, especially when the artworks deliberately strive to provoke controversy by violating deeply human and moral ideals. The disgusting and controversial use of human and animal bodies in art inevitably puts the visitor in an ethical position which is made two-fold by the artists’ political and social motivations.

Hirst’s and Margolles’ unrestrained explorations of death in the permeating air medium ultimately create an experience of inescapable disgust, and the superficial banality of air-conditioning units is undermined to create shock and controversy which become integral to the meaning of the artworks themselves. Cashell’s concept of ‘transgressive’ art, which strives to rationalise provocative art through the moral and ethical responses they provoke, is extensive and invaluable to a study of modern controversial artworks. Following some of his ideas, what this study has aimed to conduct is a detailed study of two installations which deliberately challenge taboos and generate moral responses to death through air-conditioning.

When Klein called for the artist of the future to create an “immense, limitless painting, without articulating, in silence” he probably could not have predicted *Aire/Air* and *In and Out of Love* which use the ubiquity of the air medium to make loud social and moral statements.

The fascinating crux of this subject is the realisation that disgust becomes a source of fascination and entertainment, and controversy therefore lies in both the disgusting

presentation of death in *Aire/Air* and *In and Out of Love*, and the notion that the audience enjoy the sensation of disgust generated by these installations. This is muddled further by the resultant disgust the audience feel in themselves and their own enjoyment so that the installations become perpetrators of a self-reflective and cyclical phenomenon of thrilling disgust. Far from articulating their ideas in silence as Klein called for, immateriality enables Hirst and Margolles to make bold and provocative artistic and social statements; controversy created via disgust has become the very significance of the artworks themselves.

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Multi-media

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Damien Hirst Talks about *A Thousand Years*

Rachael Campbell-Johnson, art critic for The Times

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rESmxFXAd8>> 6 January 2013

Teresa Margolles presentation in conjunction with the Global Feminisms exhibition, 2007

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEO_iyYcFJ4> 1 April 2013

Waldemar Januszczak at the Mexican Pavilion of the 2009 Venice Biennale

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Non-denominational chapel containing fourteen black but colour hued paintings by Rothko; three triptychs and five single paintings.

Houston, Texas

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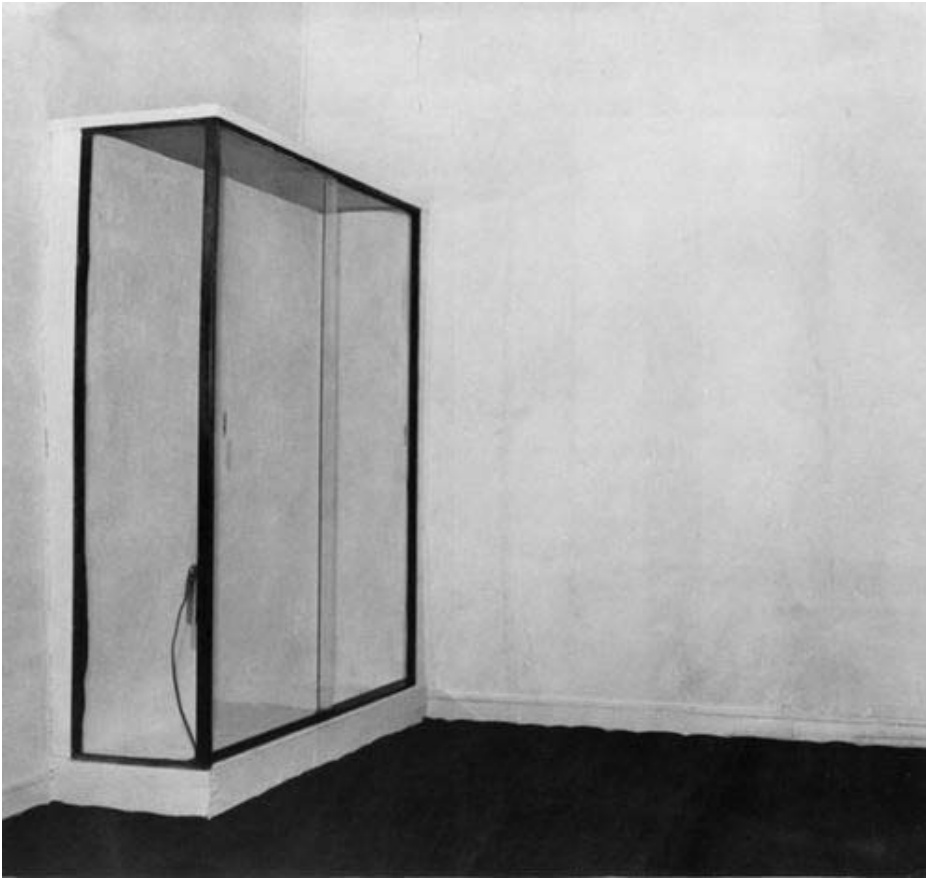


Fig.1



Fig.2

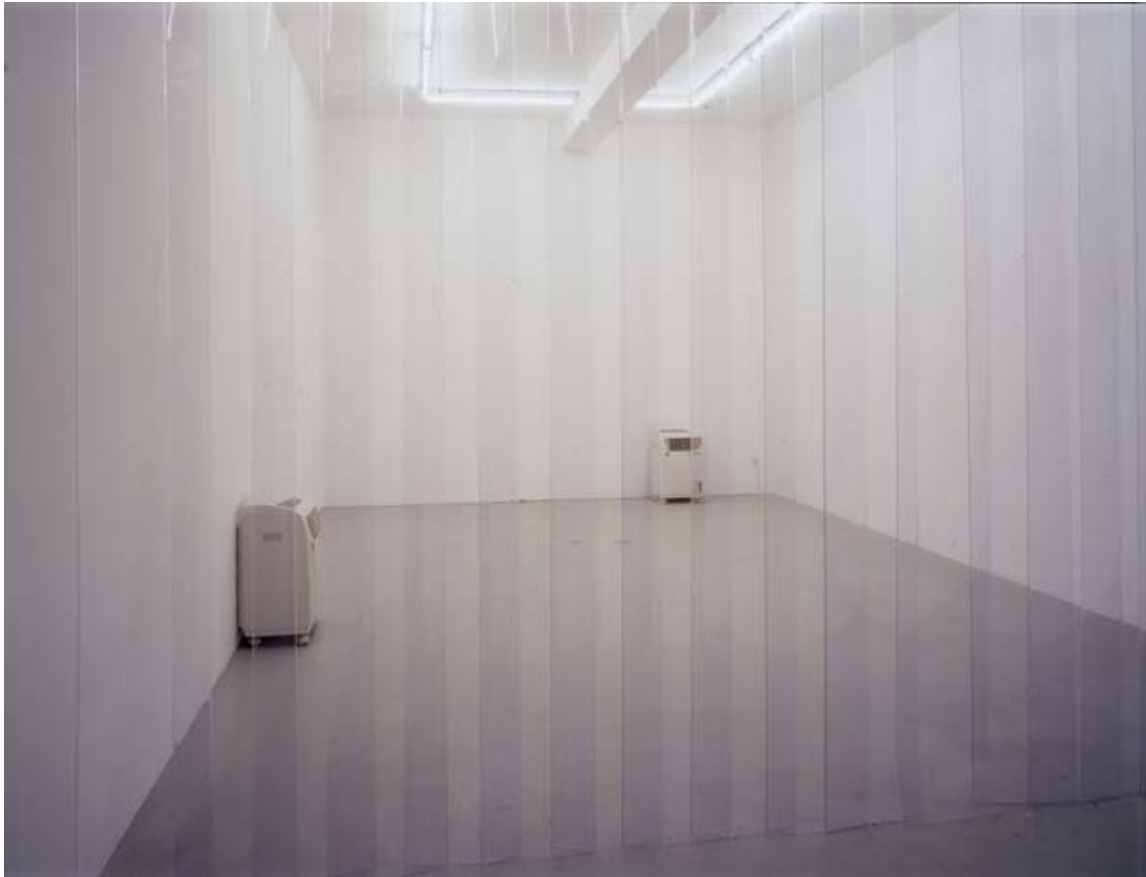


Fig.3



Fig.4



Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig.7



Fig.8

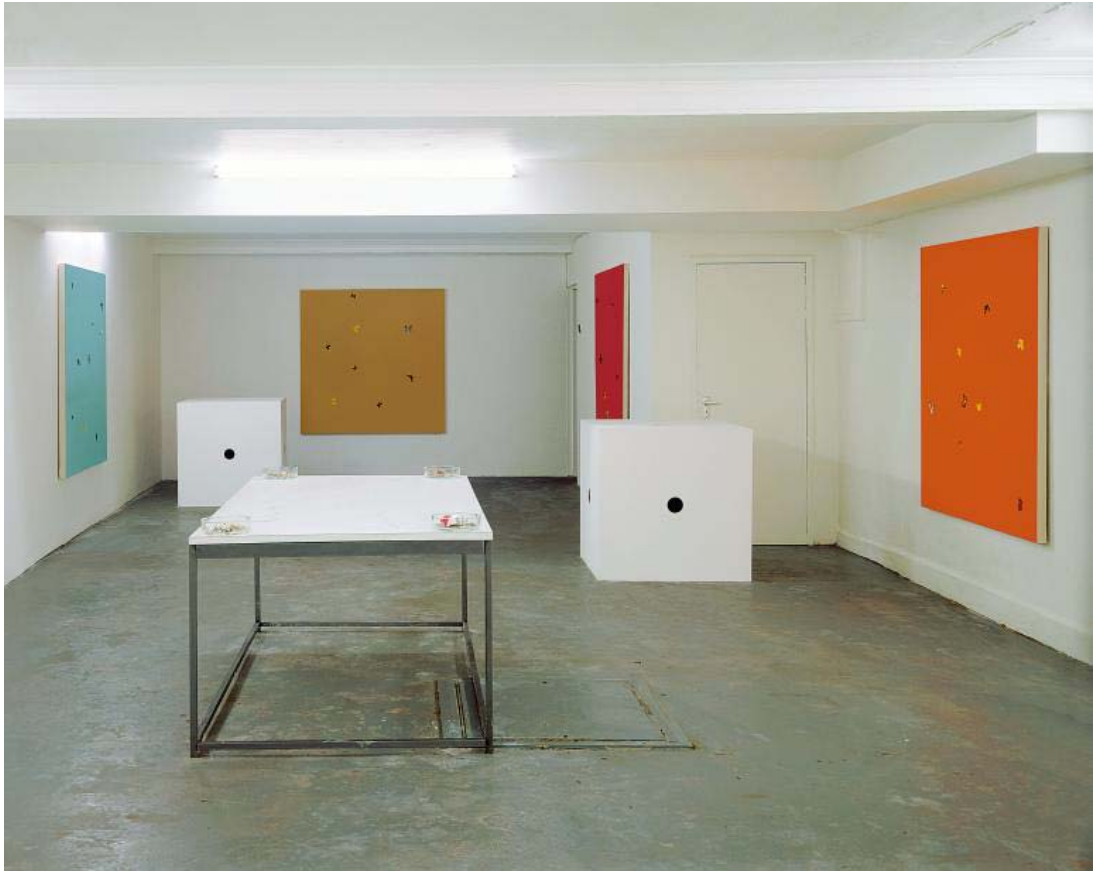


Fig.9



Fig.10



Fig.11

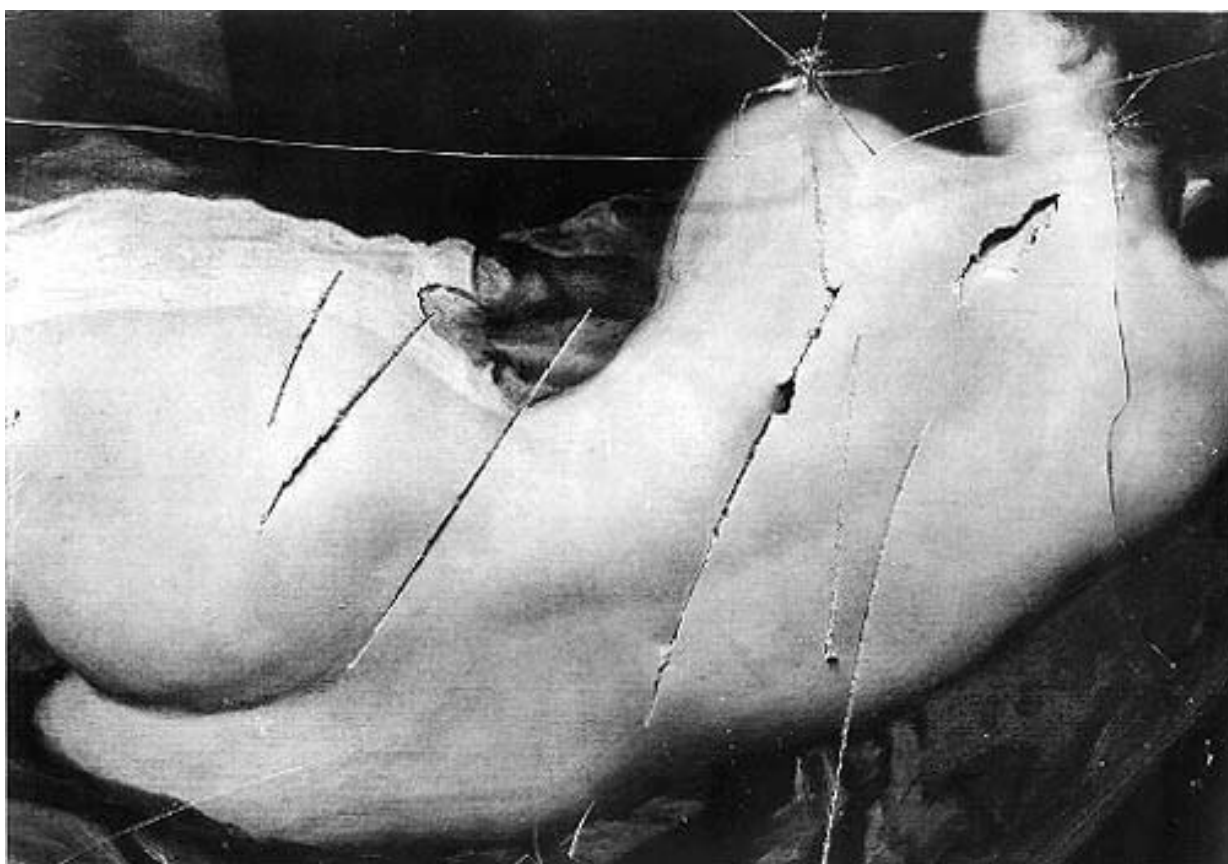


Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.14



Fig.15



Fig.16



Fig.17