A black and white photograph of a man's torso and arm. The man is shirtless, has dark hair, and a slight smile. His right arm is extended horizontally across the frame. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. Overlaid on the image is text in a typewriter font. The text is arranged in several lines: 'jamesinger' at the top, followed by 'Philosophy 542', 'Photography: The Mirror of Understanding', 'Professor Vernallis', and 'mapplethorpe.' at the bottom.

jamesinger

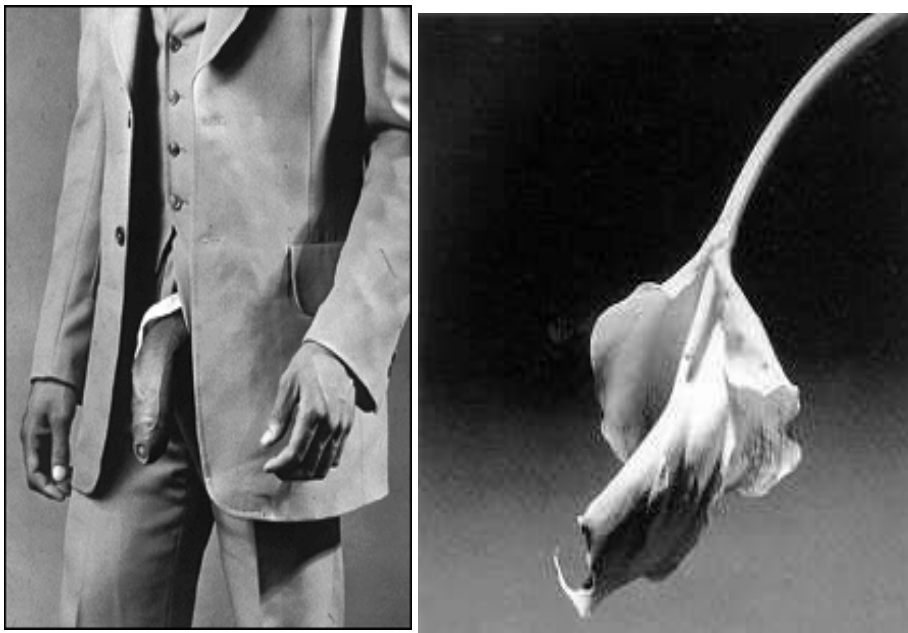
Philosophy 542
Photography: The Mirror
of Understanding
Professor Vernallis

mapplethorpe.

24. Are Mapplethorpe's photographs of sexual postures and interactions pornography?

1. Composition.

1a. Mapplethorpe. In considering formal aspects of photography, Mapplethorpe's manipulation of the medium demonstrates a kind of rigorous technical perfection with emphasis on lighting, posturing of the subject and fine detail. He employs stringent, often stark compositions, using deep richly layered textures. The use of lighting illustrates that care and time was taken in photographing the subjects. The atmosphere of these images show a precise adherence to traditional photographic form and lighting. In the case where models were used, this painstaking detail does not merely show an image captured for the sake of an intended viewer's voyeuristic fulfillment but rather, they show an effort between both photographer and subject.



1b. Pornography. In regard to form, generally speaking, 'mainstream' pornography has neither the scrupulous aesthetic consideration, nor the subversive qualities that are constantly in play

¹ Robert Mapplethorpe *Man in Polyester Suit*, ©1980. ¹ Robert Mapplethorpe *Calla Lily*, ©1986 (both images, The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe).

with artists such as Mapplethorpe. ‘Mainstream’ pornography’s fallible aspect of “catching a moment” is for the sake of the viewer, who can enter a voyeuristic role where one can, in secret, view an imperfect image that possibly was not intended to be viewed by anyone. The richly layered textures apparent in a Mapplethorpe photograph are not inherent in ‘mainstream’ pornographic photographs. This is not to say that all ‘mainstream’ pornographic photography lacks technical skill but rather, most commonly the depth of the image is not the same as a Mapplethorpe photograph.

Furthermore, the representation of tone and time in the apparent care taken in creating the photograph are most commonly different. Pornography usually lacks the painstaking detail of a Mapplethorpe photograph, which accentuates the feeling of the forbidden viewer, or voyeuristic pleasure one may get by viewing something captured in secret or at random. One does not get the feeling that the photographer is working with the subject in most pornographic imagery whereas with Mapplethorpe, the photographer appears to be collaborating with the subject.²



1c. Mapplethorpe and pornography. These categories do not consider all of Mapplethorpe’s photographs nor does this treatment of pornography include a serious study of pornographic

² For a more detailed account relating the notion of ‘trust’ between the photographer and subject see Playing With the Edge, Danto, Arthur Coleman ©1996 University of California Press (especially pages 24-61).

³ Photographers unknown. Taken from google.com images (search: (nude) (male) (80s)).

images. The goal of the above sections is to merely parse the larger categories out and narrow in on the similarities and differences between common ‘mainstream’ pornographic photography and Mapplethorpe’s photography. The pornographic photographic examples used in this essay are intended to mirror the time in which Mapplethorpe took and exhibited these photographs (1980-1989). Styles and methods in both art and ‘mainstream’ pornography change constantly therefore, I am attempting to use images and make claims that bind the considerations to the early to late 1980s. These assertions only differentiate Mapplethorpe’s imagery from other imagery of the time where before it may have all been lumped together.

Mapplethorpe considered his art to have a playfulness that enabled the work to travel between the art world and the world of pornography. His imagery technically transcends pornography common to the time in which he was working. The imagery alone idealizes aspects of the human form in its sense of photographic perfection and beauty.

2. Context.

2a. Presentation of the art. The presentation of artwork highly affects the perception the viewer has of a given piece of artwork. Even within the considerations of form, if the photographer captures images which are most commonly considered pornography (compositionally and conceptually) but prints the negatives in a large technically complicated format to display them in a traditional gallery showing, the context and potential interpretations of the imagery changes.

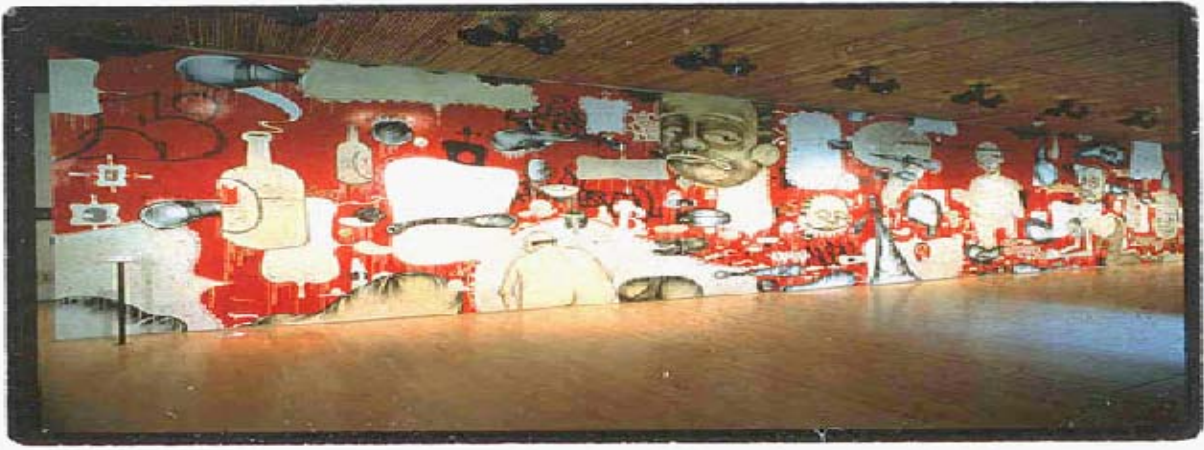


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Similarly, if one of Mapplethorpe's photographs are taken out of the gallery space and printed in a common pornographic magazine found at a street corner newsstand or in a secret spot in someone's coat closet, interpretations would be different. Viewing Mapplethorpe's photographs in a crumpled old magazine in the back corner of a liquor store while buying some cigarettes and a quart of whiskey is contextually different than viewing Mapplethorpe's photographs in a gallery space while eating some fancy cheese and drinking expensive wine out of plastic cups. The mentality of valuing where something is viewed and how it is presented allows the viewer to create a connotation of the imagery within the given context.

To further illustrate this point, consider a parallel example regarding graffiti art. When viewed on a freeway overpass or on the side of a train, graffiti art is often seen as a public nuisance however, when those in power decide that the work is acceptable in their 'world' and the work is then presented within the confines of their gallery spaces rather than on a wall in a back alley, graffiti art becomes desirable rather than a nuisance.

⁴ Robert Mapplethorpe, installation detail (date unknown) taken from google.com images (search: Mapplethorpe installation).



Taking graffiti art out of the subway tunnels and putting it into a gallery space renders artwork that is compositionally similar or identical to its earlier unacceptable form as generally acceptable in the context of the given presentation. Similarly, imagery taken out of a

⁵ 3 Installation details *Hoss 1999* by, Barry McGee (photographer unknown).

pornographic magazine and displayed in a gallery space can render it respectable, acceptable art. In these cases the structure of power can marginalize or include what they deem 'acceptable' by controlling the spaces in which the art is shown.

2b. Who the art is shown to. Taking the pornographic image out of the magazine and placing it in a gallery space greatly changes how the viewer will conceptualize the artwork. Even in the case where an artist literally tears out the images from a pornographic magazine and glues them to the walls of a gallery, the viewer will struggle to fill in the conceptual gaps for the presentation of the material even if it is to simply deem the artwork as a poor representation of a vague meaning alluded to by the artist in the title or synopsis of the piece in question.

In the case of graffiti art, the consideration of who the art is shown to can create the differentiation between what is accepted as 'art' and what is seen as mere 'vandalism'. Graffiti art on the streets is created by a faceless artist and it is shown to the public without permission, it is artwork done by anyone for anyone. Gallery art almost exclusively caters to the conventions and confines of the galleries. The viewers are a limited group most commonly comprised of educated upper class people.





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Similarly, when a Mapplethorpe negative is used to produce an image in a pornographic magazine, it is then seen as “pornography” and intended for the viewers of pornography however, if the same negative is used to create a perfect gelatin print of the same image in an accepted format suited for gallery space presentation, then it is seen as by the gallery crowd.

3. Intentionality. Some of the sections above reveal different aspects of the intentionality of the artist (i.e. who the work is shown to, how the work is presented, where it is presented, and etc.). Another facet of intentionality considers how intentionality has an effect on the construction of imagery. In the case of the graffiti artist, or in the case of the photographer of controversial imagery, the artist’s intent may be “artistic” over that of the above considerations.

To assert that a person’s work is “not art” is to assert a level of epistemic authority over the individual who has created the work and over the work itself. When a critic claims that Mapplethorpe’s imagery is purely pornographic, or that the graffiti art above is “not art”, it asserts that one has the power to deem someone’s work as “not art” or simply “pornographic”

⁶ At some point it becomes impossible to tell what pieces are in a gallery or out of a gallery. The same stencils are used on walls in London, Paris, Los Angeles, and New York as well as in some of the galleries in these cities. 4 pieces by, Banksy (www.banksy.co.uk) (photographer unknown).

over the intentionality of the artist. Simply calling a Mapplethorpe photograph pornography, or the work of Banksy as mere vandalism, disregards the intentionality of the artist. Mapplethorpe may intend to use a traditional portraiture format, which was commonly employed for historical record, to deconstruct the identities created through the medium in its usual context as a subversion of the genre.



McGee may intend to breakdown the art object and its accessibility to the viewer to create an experience of urban over-stimulation typical of a major city that is not intended for a narrowly focused audience⁸. Everyone who passes the MUNI station at Powell street in San Francisco will see a graffiti art piece for free everyday until a MUNI worker paints over the piece, which most times leaves an impression on the wall nearly as interesting as the graffiti piece it covered. If McGee were to show a similar piece in a gallery, the piece would not be accessible to the casual viewer. A potential viewer may have to enter the appropriate space from the outside and even pay a fee to view the piece. This immediately excludes potential viewers

⁷ ⁷ Robert Mapplethorpe *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*, ©1979 (The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe),
Daguerreotype image taken from google.com image search. Photographer and subjects unknown.

⁸ -TWIST-Small Crimes McGee, Barry ©2002 Progetto Prada Arte srl (Milan).

who may recognize and admire the artists they see from the seat of a subway train but who may never enter the confines of a traditional art gallery. This may illustrate one dimension of why Barry McGee and his late wife Margaret Kilgallen typically work against this confining aspect. It is common to see their work displayed directly on the gallery wall. In one case the couple painted their work in the underground parking structure of the LACMA museum in Los Angeles for a commissioned 2001 show intended for the interior of the gallery.



What emerges from this deconstruction is a power struggle between the artist, who tries to regain epistemic authority over that of the “art world” or those who claim epistemic authority over what is considered as “art”. The “art world” in turn attempts to alienate the artist from their own work by claiming this epistemic authority to marginalize the artist. The artist in turn can

⁹ Examples of “ghosting” or graffiti removal from Matthew McCormick’s 2001 documentary, *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal*.

struggle to insert the marginalization back into the mainstream or to destroy the marginalizing of their art altogether.

Graffiti artists take how and where art is viewed and redefines the “art world”. Similarly, Mapplethorpe presents a challenge to the “art world”, redefining pornographic and photographic portraits. Mapplethorpe regularly referred to his artwork as both pornography and art or “smut that is also art”.¹⁰ In essence, Mapplethorpe transcended the distinction between pornography and art. His work is not pornography just as much as it is not art.

Artists like Barry McGee and Banksy have a similar relation to their artwork. The work is both vandalism and art. The work altogether transcends what is vandalism and what is commonly deemed as sanctioned art. Seeing a piece by one of these artists on a Los Angeles street is integral to the art itself. When the presentation is translated to a gallery, the artists have the added anxiety of creating an interpretation of the true nature of their work.



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¹⁰ Playing With the Edge, Danto, Arthur Coleman ©1996 University of California Press (p.74-78)

¹¹ La Biennale di Venezia gallery installation detail. Installation by, Barry McGee, Stephen Powers, and James Todd (2002) (photographer unknown).

4. Death of the artist. The artist's intentions can be seen in cases where they are made to be obvious or in situations where the artist may voice their intent to the public. This is a way in which the artist can attempt to impose their meaning on the viewer. In these cases the viewer knows what the artist intended for them to understand in the piece conceptually because it has been mapped out for them and thus, the conceptual apparatus to the art piece is imposed on the viewer. When the artist does not impose a singular meaning on the art, or if meaning is not readily put forth by the artist, the viewer of the art creates a meaning of their own.

The viewer's interpretation of meaning on the artist's piece takes the artist out of the picture. Once the period of creation is over, the artist no longer has a bearing on the conceptual apparatus of the piece. The piece itself takes on the meaning created by the ideas and subjectivities of the viewer, who in a sense kills the artist. The artist cannot control the meaning of their art once the viewers re-author the meaning of the piece. The artist may be trying to impose a particular understanding of their piece but over time the piece may be reinterpreted in different ways from within the context of the time and the ideologies of the viewers.

“The author enters his own death, writing begins.”¹² The death of the artist transcends the totalitarian control the artist has over the meaning of their piece, the fixed meaning asserted by the artist dies with the artist. For Barthes, this creates a situation where the viewer assigns meaning to the piece. In the death of the artist, an array of meaning for a given piece of artwork becomes possible.

In the essay *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin illustrates how photographic reproductions are a form of art that kills the “aura” of the original art object, which

¹² Image, Music, Text Barthes, Roland – English translation ©1977 Hill and Wang (p.142).

formerly had been fetishized¹³. Photography's destruction of the singular art piece towards the mechanically reproducible, mass producible photograph devalues the idea of the singular original work of genius by the artist.

This technical and ideological move away from the artist dictator, or the artist as genius, posits the viewer in the place of dictator. The viewer becomes the agent that imposes a meaning on the work of art in question. When the viewer takes this power relationship and assigns meaning to the artwork, the question of whether a Mapplethorpe photograph is pornographic or artistic falls into the hands of those in power at the moment. The people who re-author the intentionality behind the conceptual aspects of any given work of art are situated knowers. Their imposition of meaning is bound to their epistemic range. When Banksy leaves the sanctioned realm of the art gallery space to paint his "artwork" inside of the London Zoo, the power structure made up of situated knowers in England do not see his "artwork" as art. Rather, from their standpoint perspective, they see his work as vandalism. Similarly, when a neo conservative Christian views a work by Mapplethorpe, they see his work as pornography.

Conclusion. There are many considerations used in deciding how to interpret a piece of artwork. There are academic considerations, political considerations, and personal considerations to name a few. To an educated art critic, the technical content of an artwork can illuminate the meaning in itself. To the casual observer, a Mapplethorpe photograph may just be a representation of reality. To the educated art critic, a Mapplethorpe photograph is a post modernist play on a medium of portraiture from the early Daguerreotypes of the nineteenth century. Simply picking out the play on traditional portraiture signifies a political assertion that the people displayed in the photographs are full bodied characters that have an air of prominence

¹³ *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Benjamin, Walter – Illuminations 1936 p.221 (in the version used for this class it was p.668 last paragraph above §3).

in their lifestyle much like that of the traditional bourgeoisie rather than degenerates in some obscure marginalized group.

The viewer may also be affected by the mode in which they view the artwork. If images are taken out of a context that divulged the artist's original intent, the viewer may create a different meaning based on the context of where and how they view the artwork. Looking at a poorly printed pornographic magazine that displays Mapplethorpe's images next to those taken for the magazine itself creates a connotation for the viewer. Similarly, viewing those same photographs in a museum next to other "great works" creates a connotation even for the casual viewer.

The artist may show their intentionality by trying to control the meaning of the artwork in many different ways but ultimately the artist loses their commanding grip on the meaning of the artwork. The viewers then have the power to create a meaning separate from the meaning imposed on the artwork created by the artist. Whether the artist meant for their work to carry a certain connotation becomes arbitrary. The meaning is re-authored by those with epistemic dominance at the moment.





¹⁴ 1. Portrait of Fredrick Douglass (date and photographer unknown). 2. *Self Portrait* Robert Mapplethorpe ©1980. 3. *penisman esperanto!* melissa coats ©2002. 4. Salvador Dali *Soft Self Portrait with a Rasher of Grilled Bacon* ©1941 (Salvador Dali Foundation). 5. Francis Bacon, *Study for Self-Portrait*, ©1985 6. *Self Portrait four times removed* Jamesinger ©2002.