

Not Safe For Work: A Curation of Contemporary Controversial Art

Charlie Clement
Student Number: 2000761
BA Hons Graphic Design
Word Count: 1428

Entitled 'Not Safe For Work' or NSFW, I am aiming to create/curate an exhibition focused on contemporary, controversial artwork and displaying them through a digital medium. The name is a modern internet acronym that describes content that you would not want to be seen viewing by colleagues, bystanders, friends or family etc. While I wouldn't consider all the pieces on my list unsafe for general viewing the use of an renowned internet phrase helps add to the atmosphere that comes with the use of a digital exhibition.

My exhibition will only be accessible through QR codes on stickers that will be scattered throughout different, urban areas. Whilst placing them in abandoned areas would help achieve that secretive nature more so I don't wish to limit public interaction to that degree.

My main point of reference for this idea is active audience theory, for a couple of reasons. Firstly the consumption of the media is reliant on members of the public actively choosing to interact with the QR codes and then go on to view the content. Secondly the nature of controversy is subjective. The art included will not strike a chord with every person that views it. It is down to how each audience member consumes and perceives the media that will dictate the level of impact each piece has.

According to A Dictionary of Media and Communication Active Audience Theory is "individual audience members who are actively (albeit often unconsciously) involved—both cognitively and emotionally—in making sense of texts. This active involvement has several interrelated dimensions: perception, comprehension, interpretation, evaluation, and response." Munday R, Chandler D. 2011. *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*. 1st Edition. Oxford. (1)

Below is a rough plan for the stages/layout of the site/exhibition

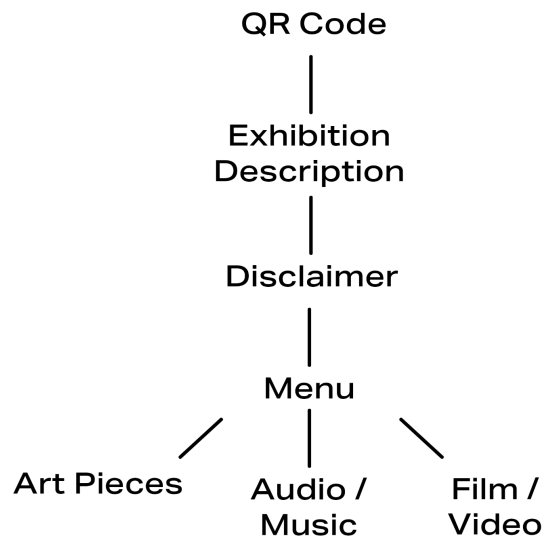


Figure one.

Immersion / Piss Christ



This piece requires little in the way of explanation of its controversy. Immersion or “Piss Christ” is a 1987 photograph taken by artist Andres Serrano. While I am not personally offended by the piece the infamy it gathered is scarcely matched “in 1989, after *Piss Christ* was exhibited in Virginia, it attracted the attention of an outspoken pastor

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and, soon after, of Congress.” *100 Photos*.

<<http://100photos.time.com/photos/andres-serrano-piss-christ>> 2/4/2021.

As far as contemporary, controversial artwork goes this piece is a prime example. The fact it was able to garner the attention and outrage of congress highlights its ability to shock. Due to the piece’s age it has passed its heyday of controversy but deserves to be remembered for the impact it had, hence it’s inclusion. Whether it still holds its weight is down to interpretation, which harkens back to Active Audience Theory.

Figure 2

Myra



Myra is a painting created by Marcus Harvey in 1995. Myra Hindley (the figure depicted), along with Ian Brady, was a culprit in the murder of five children between 1963 to 1965. That makes the image striking enough, but what makes it more harrowing is the fact the painting is made up of handprints of small children. This twisted intertextuality makes the piece all the more poignant. In contrast to Immersions I feel this piece retains it’s controversial aspect despite being created at

roughly the same time as the tragedies are still fairly recent and the use of child hand prints shows an air of forethought and cleverness that I feel Immersions lacks, as I feel that piece is more just shooting for pure shock value.

“when the work was put on display at the Royal Academy, angry members of the public immediately threw eggs at it. Some see this as an overreaction stating that the painting is

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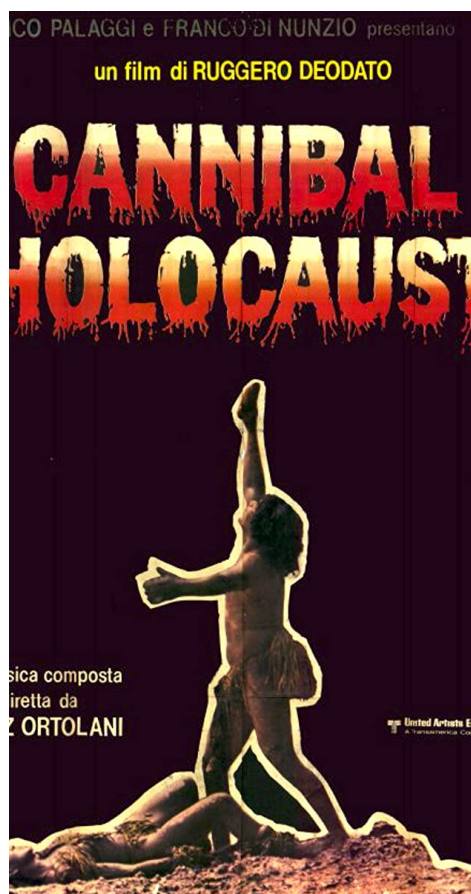
merely conveying the enormity of Hindley's crime." 2016. *Top 10 Controversial Artworks*.

<<https://www.artlyst.com/features/top-10-offensive-works-art/2/>> . 2/4/2021

I feel displaying this through a digital medium may actually do the piece a disservice. As it is a physical painting not seeing the rawness of the paint texture and the physician imprints of the hands must detract from the effectiveness in some way. However that is my own personal interpretation. A member of the public may find the image as a digital presence disturbing enough.

Figure 3

Cannibal Holocaust



I think it is important to include a range of mediums when looking at controversial art. Art itself is such a broad category after all. With that said, cannibal Holocaust is infamous for being one of the most controversial films of all time and I intend to display it for its full run time in my digital exhibition. This will definitely test the audience in terms of interaction as it is the most gratuitous in its controversial topics. From actual animals being killed on screen, to crude and untrue racial depictions of Amazonian tribes. There aren't any complex overarching themes, it's just shock horror and violence. The film is banned in numerous countries but an up to date list does not exist, although

it was briefly banned in the UK.

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"In 1980, Deodato released what is still regarded in many quarters as the most controversial film ever made: *Cannibal Holocaust*". Rose S. 2011. *Cannibal Holocaust: 'Keep filming! Kill more people!'*. The Guardian. 2/4/2021

<<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/sep/15/cannibal-holocaust>>

Figure 4

My Bed



A slightly tamer piece in the form of *My Bed* by Tracy Emin. While I describe it as tame I feel "Nuanced" would be the better word. This piece requires the audience to read into the piece and the story behind it to truly grasp its meaning.

From a distance it just looks like a

dishevelled bed, but the more you look, you notice the alcohol bottles, the cigarettes, the contraceptives, the period stained clothes and it all becomes so much more visceral.

An article surrounding this piece raised a very interesting point "*My Bed* has to be perceived in the context of the Emin's background, especially the fact she was sexually assaulted at the age of 13; five years later, the artist became pregnant and had an abortion – two crucial traumas which framed her practice in the realm of confession." Takak B. 2019. *How Art Imitates Life in Tracey Emin's Bed*. Wide Walls Magazine. 2/4/2021.

(<https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/tracey-emin-my-bed>)

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I think knowledge of these aspects of Emin's life are important in processing the gravity of the piece. I feel the digital medium may detract from the piece because the initial shock of it came from the fact it was a live installation. A method to try and replicate this in my exhibition could be virtual reality.

I think creating a virtual environment placing the viewer in the centre of the bed would bring a unique experience to the piece. By moving the phone around them the viewer would be able to view all the aspects of the piece from a POV perspective.



(Image source:

<https://www.androidcentral.com/how-smartphone-based-vr-works>)

Figure 5

Strange Fruit



I feel that truly shocking music is hard to come by in recent years. I myself listen to a lot of metal and hip hop, two genres that tout their controversial nature. However, A song has never chilled me like Billie Holidays 'Strange Fruit'.

"Southern trees bear a strange fruit. Blood on the leaves and blood at the root. Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze. Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees." The lyrics in this blues/jazz piece are more poignant and visceral than any music made today. Written in protest of treatment of African Americans I find it particularly jarring that this song was released in 1939, less than a hundred years ago.

"Radio stations in the US and abroad blacklisted it and Holiday's label, Columbia Records, refused to record it. When she toured the song, some proprietors tried discouraging her from singing it for fear of alienating or angering their patrons." Amoako A. 2019. *Strange Fruit: The most shocking Song of All Time?*. BBC Culture. 4/4/21.

<<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190415-strange-fruit-the-most-shocking-song-of-all-time>>

This song will touch it's listeners in different ways. I feel like this piece perfectly reflects the active audience theory as you have to really engage with the lyrics to understand the message. To me it's a harrowing reminder of how recent these atrocities actually were. This will be available as an MP3 file to stream from the site. As it is purely an audio piece it will be down to the audience to choose to engage with the listening, be it through speakers or headphones. The lyrics will be listed below the file for reference.

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