

Chloe Fraser

MC Harper

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How Far Is Too Far?

According to the dictionary, provocation is something that provokes, arouses, or stimulates. But what is said on paper does not even come close to encompassing the full effect of provocation on human beings. Provocation comes from many sources, but perhaps the most prominent of these is art. Art is designed as such, to stretch our minds and introduce a new perspective that our minds may never have even considered previous to the experience of that piece of art, whether it be performance art, an installation, or a painting. However, as with all powerful and dangerous things, there must be limits to just how far art can go in provoking us. Just as any thing that holds great power, there must be checks on that power, and for that reason art should be provocative, as is its duty, but within certain boundaries.

Photographer Mathew Brady was one of the first pioneers of provocative photography. A photographer who gained notoriety in the 1860s for his work in portraiture of the rich and famous, Brady was the first in America to show the horrors of war with a photograph of the piles of dead at Antietam, entitled "The Dead At Antietam." According to the Library of Congress page on Mathew B. Brady, this shocked the American public, which had never been exposed to the carnage of war before. But while the images were surely violent, and definitely shocking, the provocation was necessary and set the standard for documenting a war. Never before had anyone had the audacity to photograph a war, to bring its horrific reality to the people spouting opinions about a battlefield they had never seen or experienced. It drove the terrible human cost of war home, and in this capacity it was serving art's provocative purposes well. For while Brady forced

America to unflinchingly look at horrific things, it also provoked the public to think differently, and even rethink war, with brother fighting against brother. But it was within limits, because while terrible, it was also beautiful in its clear depiction of the fallen and fighting, the honor but also the terror represented clearly through his troop of photographers' lenses. Brady refrained from shock value, but did not flinch from showing the public what needed to be seen. This is a good example of why provocation is necessary in art, as some would argue. It can be used to make us see what we might have perhaps not even thought of, force us to look at what we had previously closed our eyes to.

In the book of poems *Picture Bride* by Cathy Song, the reader finds much provocation. Through startling imagery and unexpected honesty with the reader, Song paints a culturally influenced portrait of life as a Chinese American and her experiences. In one such moving portrait, entitled "A Dream of Small Children," Song writes about abortion and its emotional aftermath. Using phrases like "a jet slits open the belly of clouds" and "eat the warm ovaries like fruit" (55), Song shocks us into thinking about the cruelty and sadness of the intentional loss of a child, as well as painting vivid and almost frightening images. These shocking images also relate back to the event at the center of the poem—the abortion. When one thinks of the poem in this context, the imagery of slitting open a belly or eating reproductive organs becomes almost repulsive as related to the loss of this child. But here we find a balance, the scale some artists even out so well. Even as Song shocks us and uses this provocative topic to broaden our thinking, she walks the line of keeping the topic sanitary—refusing to indulge in bloody details or simple shock value. Here, the provocation of art is perfectly expressed within its limits, the limits imposed upon it by its very nature as a creation of humanity.

The outspoken proponents of art with no limits often speak from a simply idealistic viewpoint, speaking generally without knowledge of what art without limits looks like. How

about a dog, starving to death just out of reach of food, such as in the work of a Costa Rican artist? Do these supporters of limitless art know that according to Stephanie Cash in "Provocation Art: Where to Draw the Line?," in the name of art, Gregor Schneider has proposed an art installment in Dusseldorf in which terminally ill patients will be on display as they die? All of these are legitimate art exhibits proposed by artists who protest any encroachment upon their artistic license. Would you be able to stand behind these types of art? Without some boundaries, this is the type of art that would become acceptable and proliferate, demanding ever more provocation as the standards for what is art sink lower and lower.

Why, one might say, should art be subjected to limits? In its capacity to provoke, it should be given free rein to expand our minds. But when anything is given that sort of power, the limitless capability to cross all lines, art is compromised. Art major Alisa Shvarts of Yale University is a perfect example of art "run wild." Her 2008 senior project, as reported by Martine Powers in the *Yale Daily News*, was supposed to be her magnum opus—her grand finale. What she created was a monstrosity, repeatedly inseminating herself and then chemically inducing abortions in her bathtub, using the blood, mixed with Vaseline and smeared on plastic sheets wrapped around a huge cube suspended from the ceiling, and footage from these induced abortions, projected on the cube and wall behind it, as her installation. Now, according to Powers, along the way, she had to pass through many people to get to this point. She would have consulted her advisor, her teacher, and even proposed it to her class. None of these people objected, insisting on the freedom of art, freedom of expression, despite the fact that the exhibit was replaced at the last moment due to the general outcry, repeated, purposeful miscarriages, not to mention the effects on the girl's body, is NOT art. To use the excuse of art's freedom to grossly distort and destroy life is inexcusable and illustrates the need for limits based on humanity in art. On top of the more general reason this is horribly objectionable, think of its

effect on all of the women struggling to conceive, as an “artist” repeatedly creates and destroys that which they seek so desperately. As with everything, art must answer to a code of conduct. While its code is admittedly more liberal than ours, it still must have limits, or else the power of art will run amok.

In conclusion, art is a powerful thing. It has the power to make many people feel many different things, as varying as the population of earth. It can be used to express a variety of things, as method of healing in therapy, as an outlet for emotions too powerful to handle alone, as a provocative tool meant to expand our thinking. As Uncle Ben once said to Peter Parker, “With great power comes great responsibility.” Whether it be art or genetically engineered superpowers, anything that carries so much power and emotion must answer to something or someone. To allow such power to run wild would be a folly on society’s part, just as attempting to tightly control it would also be a huge mistake. As seen throughout history, from the photographic work of Mathew Brady to the poems of Cathy Song, art can push the envelope without completely bursting the constraints which in part created it. When art is given free license to break away from its creators and their humanity, seen in the work of Shvarts, it becomes not a benefactor of society but a malefactor. When it comes to provocation in art, any provocation contained in art must be answerable to its creators—humanity.

Works Cited

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