

Defilement is traditionally thought of as an unproductive or destructive act but it can be used to create; it is a tool that, when utilized tactfully in art, can be very effective in exposing a poignant truth or idea. Defilement is a powerful tool because it is fueled by aggression and when channeled into art this aggression makes an argument against the object or concept that has been defiled. When defilement is used in art to expose a greater truth, in turn it defiles the viewer; stripping them of their innocence on a subject or challenging their sensibilities. This can be demonstrated through the analysis of specific works that explore this concept through an array of artistic lenses.

The usage of defilement in art can be broken down into four categories: physical, symbolic, conceptual and ideological. Physical defilement takes place when the artist actively upsets or destroys an object, symbolic defilement is when the artist alters a symbolic object or places it out of context, conceptual defilement is when the artist creates a piece that questions or destroys a conception that the viewer previously had about a subject and ideological defilement is when the artist creates a piece that challenges the viewers sense of propriety and normalcy.

PHYSICAL DEFILEMENT

This piece sparked controversy and heated debates in both the UK and US. Serrano's photograph depicts a plastic crucifix submerged in a jar of his own urine. When displayed in Avignon, France, Civitas, a group of French-Catholic fundamentalists, deemed the piece blasphemous and organized a large protest outside of the museum. Civitas stated that the object of their protest was, "to denounce the hateful and contemptuous attacks whose victims were Christianity and the person of Jesus Christ under the pretended "cultural" context."¹ Shortly thereafter, the piece itself was vandalized and smashed with a hammer. In the US, "Piss Christ" led to a debate questioning the National Endowment for the Arts and whether art should be publicly funded at all if such controversial

work was being made with taxpayer money.² The reason for the outrage of the church and the religious right was because they felt as if the piece was attacking God and religion itself. However the piece was not a commentary on the Christian religion but rather the **misuse** of religion for ulterior motives.³ One example of this is Sarkozy's use of religion in his campaign for re-election. Serrano described his



Figure 1: *Piss Christ* -- Andres Serrano, 1987 59.7" x 40.6"

¹ Angelqueen.org, <<http://www.angelqueen.org/forum/viewtopic.php?p=423094>>. Nov. 18, 2011.

² David Ng, latimes.com, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster>. Nov 18, 2011.

³ Angelique Chrisafis, guardian.co.uk, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011>. Nov. 18, 2011.

photo as a criticism of the “billion dollar Christ-for-profit industry,” and a “condemnation of those who abuse the teachings of Christ for their own ignoble ends.”

SYMBOLIC DEFILEMENT

William Pope.L uses performance based art as a tool to comment on the issues of race, sex, consumerism and social class in our society. In his performance piece “Eating the *Wall Street Journal*,” he sat naked except for a jock strap, a silk tie, work boots and a dusting of flour atop a toilet ten feet from the ground. Aided by milk and ketchup, Pope.L slowly ate a stack of *Wall Street Journals* and then proceeded to regurgitate



Figure 2: *Eating the Wall Street Journal* -- William Pope.L, 2000

them. Of this piece Pope.L said, “Our consumer society promises power and wealth simply by owning certain objects, which harks back to primitive magic and voodoo. I figured if I also eat it, just imagine how much power I can drain from this fetishized object.”⁴ This performance brought to light the indignity one who is downtrodden or marginalized must suffer in order to rise to a place of security or power in our society. Pope.L’s nudity and use of flour speaks to the struggle of attempting to mask your nakedness, your vulnerability as well as who you truly are in order to succeed by corporate America’s standards. He exposes himself reduced to his most primal instincts as he tries to consume this symbol of power. This piece also brings into question our perception of power in this country and how ridiculous it is; something like the *Wall Street Journal* represents power and respect but it itself is so weak, so easily destroyed, it can be eaten and regurgitated like a piece of rancid meat.

CONCEPTUAL DEFILEMENT

This piece is based off of Kienholz’s strong feelings towards the mistreatment of Native-Americans in the U.S. Kienholz explained the piece as the “stuffed remains of an Indian girl raped by frontiersmen.”⁵

⁴ Michael Rush, nytimes.com, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/02/arts>, Nov. 28, 2011.

⁵ Edward Kienholz, Nancy Reddin-Kienholz, Walter Hopps, Rosetta Brooks, *Kienholz, A Retrospective*, Whitney Museum of Art, New York, 1996. P53.



Figure 3: *A Retrospective* -- Kienholz, 1996

wears traditional Moccasins on her feet that have been dirtied and cracked in the way her people's traditions have been damaged. The forearms of the girl at the bottom of the wall mount are placed in the same fashion as deer hooves to hold a hunters rifle. The fact that the girls hands are at the ready to receive the weapon of her own demise may speak to the way settlers forced Native Americans into self-oppression through alcoholism and poverty.

IDEOLOGICAL DEFILEMENT

This photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe is from a series done on the S&M scene in New York. One of Mapplethorpe's goals in his photography was to shed light on subcultures and groups of people that were forced underground by mainstream society. This image offends people's sense of propriety because of its blatant theme of sexuality, fetishism and masochism; it also conjures thoughts of our innate self-destructive tendencies and the odd pleasure we get from them. A good friend of mine once described to me a painful hair removal treatment her aunt underwent saying, "Everyone has their own way of torturing

This piece utilizes defilement on two different levels: the subject of the piece has literally been defiled, her chastity has been violated and she has been reduced to the likes of a hunting trophy. The assault of the girl that is represented in this piece serves to destroy the romanticized ideas many Americans have of jovial Thanksgiving feasts and camaraderie between early settlers and Native Americans.

In this piece harsh reality is pushed upon the viewer visually and ideologically. The way the legs protrude from a circle of disjointed wood pieces gives the feeling that they have just burst through a wall, symbolizing the reality of history

escaping the wall of lies we have used to shield ourselves from it. She



Figure 4: *Lou* -- Robert Mapplethorpe, 1978

themselves.” In this image the rigidity of the hand and the way the thumb points straight at the viewer is almost accusatory, as if the subject is saying, “you are the same as me but you choose to deny it.” It is a reminder of the fact that as humans we all have moments where we revel in our own pain.

For the visual component of my project I chose to sculpturally represent the three of the seven deadly sins that I believe myself to be guilty of. In my research on defilement I came upon The Divine Life Society, an Ashram in the Himalayas, and I was struck by their view on purity. Their belief is that purity is achieved by freedom from ones desires and everything that is not a necessity is a desire, which therefore impure. This immediately brought the seven deadly sins to mind because they are all fueled by desire. I believe that the only way to be free from your sins is to accept them as an aspect of your humanity, rather than reject them. There is no worse sin than false pride in your own freedom from desire, we all want things that are beyond our control.

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