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# Transgressing the Transgressive –Why Modern Art No Longer Shocks

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The great code word for art meant to scandalize is “transgressive.” The term was well-established by the end of the 1960s, when artists sought to scandalize middle-class morality by “transgressing” moral boundaries. Artists and writers began pushing through the moral limits, seeking the thrill that comes by shocking the masses.

All this was part of the Marxist dream of destroying bourgeois morality and values in order to liberate humanity from the constraints of the Christian worldview. In some ways, the effort was stunningly successful. But transgressive artists have run into a wall of sorts. How do you scandalize when every moral conviction has already been transgressed and trampled upon?

Eric Felten of *The Wall Street Journal* wrote about this in his recent column, “After the Shock is Gone.” Felten argues that artists who seek the transgressive approach today are often frustrated. “But once all the boundaries have been blurred, what’s left?” he asks.



Felten cites leftist philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who observes that perversion itself “is no longer subversive.” It has all been seen already. Perversion no longer shocks. As Žižek notes, “transgressive excess loses its shock value.” It is hard to invent a new perversion that someone else has not already exhibited in a museum or presented on the theater stage.

This reality frames many of the artistic worlds around us, ranging from the local art museum to the television set. It all becomes boring as it loses its shock value, leaving the artist looking increasingly pathetic. “How many decades will Madonna continue to wear that same costume as if it were a racy innovation?” Felten asks.

The inability to transgress or shock is a sign of cultural decadence, but it is also a signifier of the foolishness of sinful humanity. Left to our own devices, we will do our best to shock ourselves until we can shock ourselves no longer. Then, we grow frustrated.

Transgressive art is exactly what we should expect from transgressors, is it not?

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Eric Felten, “[After the Shock is Gone](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, Friday, December 3, 2010.

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