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The Relationship Between Viewer and Fine Art

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the *Relationship*
between

VIEWER and
FINE ART



CAMERON **DEUEL**

Paintings of violence are hung on the walls of museums throughout the world, seen as displays of artistic mastery rather than portrayals of destructive behavior. An example of this is seen in Domenico Fetti's "David with the Head of Goliath," an Italian Baroque painting thought to have originated in 1620 (The Royal Collection 2007).



The text displays a tremendous representation of power and, simultaneously, lack thereof. The posthumous gaze of Goliath towards David and the sword suggests an envious dynamic. David is situated upon Goliath's head as if presenting a hunting trophy, which perpetually dehumanizes Goliath. The frame that is formed between David and the sword emphasizes a celestial bond between him and an otherworldly higher being due to the illuminated sky, which makes up the focal point of the text. The image inherently creates a hypertextual

relationship for the viewer, especially since the iteration of David and Goliath is popular enough to be universally understood from the Biblical legend. "David with the Head of Goliath" is obviously an interpretation of that story, meaning the image exists hypertextually since its existence would not be possible without the original text.

The story of David and Goliath acts as a powerful metaphor, suggesting the victory of an underdog over a powerful giant. Qualities of this perception can be seen in articles such as Oliver Falck's "Routinization of innovation in German manufacturing; the David-Goliath symbiosis revisited," "Goliath in David's Clothing: The Oppressed Militant and the Mighty Victim in the Rhetoric of Self-

Defense." by Amanda Davis and Dana Cloud, and Rich Thomaselli's "David & Goliath." While this understanding is widely accepted, this essay will abandon any allegorical connotation of the text.

Although this piece allows for various interpretations, "David with the Head of Goliath" is universally viewed as fine art. Fine art is able to depict graphic violence without generating distaste because the audience views fine art as removed from reality due to the space in which it appears, the understanding of how the image was produced, and the belief that fine art represents a subjective reality. In this essay, the image will be properly defined as fine art and compared to photography to show the difference in reactions to violence based upon the medium in which an image is displayed. Photography is widely believed to showcase an objective reality because the photographic image is created directly from "real life," while fine art is understood to be an interpretive presentation of an artist's imagination. Within this discussion, the role of production of fine art is examined alongside the production of photography, ultimately explaining the difference of how audiences interact with both

VIEWPOINT

The object, space, and spectator's perspective all intertwine to create a viewing experience.

fine art and photography. The production of fine art is perceived to be an artist's rendering of their own imagination while photography suggests a distinguished view into reality.

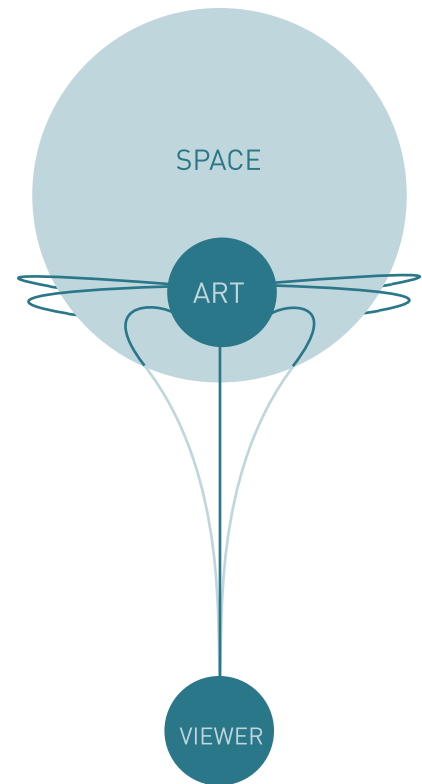
Additionally, the space in which the image is seen can alter the perception of the audience. When fine art shows violence, the audience ignores any tastelessness by using the space of the exhibit as an indicator of historical importance. In doing so, the audience is desensitized from any present violence. However, since photography is seen as reality, images of violence are off-putting for an audience.

Fine art can be simply defined as works that are "worth preserving and viewing," deriving from the imagination of the artist (Helmert 63). Fetti's artistic rendition of the famed Biblical story was acquired by King Charles I in the 1600s, proving that the work holds value (The Royal Collection 2007). Additionally, this piece is thought to have come directly from Fetti's imagination because "the possibility that this painting may have been a workshop copy, [...] seems highly unlikely. The handling of the paint is spontaneous and applied in a self-assured manner" (The Royal Collection 2007).

Finally, Helmert warns, "painting is an art of

spatiality," suggesting that viewers "consider the temporal and spatial implications of context: the ways in which the meaning of a single image can alter dramatically due to placement, context, cropping, and captioning" (63-4). Fine art is implied through the space in which it is viewed, which alters the perception of the viewer based on their surrounding.

There are three elements of fine art; "the spectator, the space of viewing, and the object that is viewed" (Helmert 65). The relationship between these elements establishes a framework through which the spectator views the object. David Carrier argues that fine art is aimed towards an ideal spectator who "would view [the piece] as a sacred work" (21). Fetti's interest in painting Biblical scenes suggests his ideal spectator to be Christian. Charles McCorquodale notes, "Baroque represents Catholic supremacy at it's height," giving "David with the Head of Goliath" a large audience of ideal spectators (7). Helmert paraphrases Matei Calinescu's concept of rereading, by noting, "even before we enter the space of exhibition, we have



developed 'certain expectations' about what we will see" (77). The space itself creates expectations for the perception of the spectator upon viewing the images within the display.

Conversely, photography is "thought to work by twinning denotation and connotation, matching the ability to depict the world 'as it is' with the ability to couch what is depicted in a symbolic frame consonant with broader understandings of the world" (Zelizer 3). The combination of denotation, showing the literal contents of the image, and connotation, any meaning built from the contents of the image, gives the audience a greater understanding of the photograph. The audience of photography tends to comprehend the image as a direct representation of reality wherein the photographer is a recorder of truth, rather than an artist who created an image based on imagination. By depicting the world "as it is,"

the photograph tends to hold more gravity because viewers see an objective reality. These photographic images “are expected to offer only fragments of understanding, and thus direct their viewers elsewhere to understand what it shown” (Zelizer 6). Since photography exhibits reality, viewers are given license to consider the time before and after the image was captured. This generally occurs when viewing an upsetting image, when “contingency and the imagination may constitute a particularly useful stance for those needing to establish meaning” (Zelizer 6). Contingency occurs when an image contains an element of impossibility or uncertainty because an audience needs to cope with unfamiliarity by attempting to force the image to make sense. Imagination builds from contingency when an audience speculates about the image with “an uneven regard for what is actually shown” (Zelizer 6). These instances can only be attested to photography due to the assumption that the image reflects an objective reality. Fine art

can similarly include an audience into the discourse of the image, “the ritual process of viewing allows the spectators to re-imagine the past and create stories about the images” (Helmers 67). When fine art spectators view art, they feel as though they have witnessed history and build upon their knowledge of the nuances within the image. Reactionary measures to both photography and fine art yield a similar path towards ignorance since neither fully faces the intensity of violence head-on within the medium. For example, “a black-and-white photograph of a naked female corpse killed by the Nazis becomes an art installation years later, featuring a beautiful nude woman sleeping erotically under pastel strobe lights” (Zelizer 6-7). Reverting back to Helmer’s argument about spatiality, fine art allows graphic violence because the space in which it appears suggests more sophisticated inhibitions. The reception of “David with the Head of Goliath” is similarly diverted in the interest of deconstructing any violence by

hiding behind artistic license. Rather than viewing the image as a bloody decapitation, the connotation of the image is focused around a glorified, religious anecdote, meant for display.

In discussing the role of the production of the image, Cara A. Finnegan believes, “another equally important moment in the life of a photograph is reproduction” (204). Perception of an image can be altered by how and where it appears, separate from the original source. While fine art holds value based upon the internal expectation of the audience by simply being in the space of an exhibit, the image may begin to lose impact when it is re-appropriated into different formats. “When [images] are transported into other fields of visual display [...] it becomes clear that subjunctive notions of the world ‘as if’ it were a better, more coherent, gentler, more equitable place than it may be” (Zelizer

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16). For instance, when “David with the Head of Goliath” is reproduced on a postcard, the audience is further desensitized to the image. Fine art is able to be repositioned indifferent formats because of the understanding that they do not directly reflect reality. If photographs of prisoners from Guantanamo Bay were published, their re-appropriation into formats like posters or mugs would be unlikely because they present an unsettling reality. “We need to understand, not only where images ‘come from,’ but also what they are made to do in the contexts in which we discover them” (Finnegan 204). Using “David with the Head of Goliath” in the format of a postcard, the image becomes secondary to any attached message, thus, the understanding of fine art is lost through lack of exhibit.

The interaction between an audience and fine art is heavily shaped by how they understand history. The act of “looking is always framed by past experiences and learned ideas about how and what to see” (Helmets 65). Spectators assess their role by including themselves in the text as a separate entity that attempts to label their interpretations of the text into categories. These categories range from “using, owning, appropriating, keeping,

remembering, and commemorating” (65).

This ensures that an audience views the death of Goliath as a commemorative action rather than the death of another human being.

Alternately, photography allows an audience to view death, which “has also been associated with mourning and grief, where gazing on pictures of the dead can help mourners come to terms with their loss” (Zelizer 25).

Again, photography is presumed to show reality, or “as is” compared to the subjective intentionality of fine art, which is perceived to be constructed from the imagination of the artist. Photography is both “belonging to the past but engaged in the present [and] creates a temporal moment of ‘having been there’” (Zelizer 25). Since “David with the Head of Goliath” is fine art, such connectivity is lost and ignored. If the text were a photograph, the decapitation would be considered an unsettling image, especially under the context of a celebrated death. Furthermore, violence within fine art is overshadowed by the belief that it contributes to history instead of reflecting reality.

While fine art can be defined as worth preserving and viewing, the most influential component comes from the understanding

that the image is derived from the imagination of the artist. When viewing fine art, the spectator relates to the object being viewed based upon the space in which it appears. The relationship between these components creates further distance between the spectator and the content of fine art by transferring power from the image to the method of viewing in the space of an exhibit. Photography differs because it implies reality and, in doing so, allows an audience to search beyond the image based upon what the photograph presents. Through connotation and denotation, the viewer is able to examine the time surrounding the image, basing their assessments on how the contents of the photograph interact with one another. Instead of examining the objective reality of a photograph, the subjectivity of fine art only allows the viewer to be included as a separate entity. However, outside of the exhibit, fine art is seen as even further removed from reality as the spectator feels wholly disconnected from the image. While fine art may contain the same components of a photograph, the inescapable connotations of the medium force spectators to denounce any connection to their immediate reality.

Violence within fine art is overshadowed by the belief that it contributes to history instead of reflecting reality.



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