What Is GOOD Art? 2010
Can art be ethical? Should it be ethical? Can it be unethical? If it is, does that make it bad art? These questions have puzzled Western thinkers at least since Plato. It was once commonplace for art critics to judge art by its lessons for how we should live, but recently numerous artists and philosophers have argued that art and morality can be, are, and ought to remain independent.

Of course, art has changed over time, as have the rules for ethical living, so the issue of how they are related becomes complicated. At a very basic level, art is a combination of form and content. “Form” covers the physical materials used to create the work, arranged according to some principle of design. The “content” dimension of art incorporates the artists’ ideas and message as well as how those who experience the work perceive it. The interplay between form and content is part of what gives art its power.

Thinkers have used many different rubrics for judging the worthiness of art. Some critics maintain that form trumps content: If the artist does not have mastery of the media he or she uses, then it is bad art. Others maintain the opposite. For Tolstoy, art’s greatness comes from its ability to cut through viewers’ defenses and “infect” them. We have no choice but to be moved by effective art.

The terrain that defines “ethics” is equally powerful and complex. The lasting allure of ethical thinking stems in part from the difficulty of determining how to live a “good” life. We live in a world in which simple right/wrong decisions are often met without controversy. However, we are very likely to confront difficult choices between two “rights”—loyalty versus honesty, sustainability versus equity—on a daily basis. In the real world, being good is hard, in part because figuring out what qualifies as “good” or “best” is no small task. Do the ends justify the means, or does the code by which we live matter more?
What if we don’t believe we can predict the outcome of a decision—are rules then more important? How do we weigh the needs and rights of individuals in a society in which we are all interdependent?

Given the amount of disagreement over what makes art or ethics independently valuable, it is no surprise that combining the two fields has resulted in controversy. According to one school, art and ethics are so unrelated as to make it ridiculous even to try to join them. Art is important, and ethics is important, but they simply do not inform each other. What is ethical about listening to Miles Davis? If we cannot find a satisfying answer does that mean that Miles Davis’s music is not art? At the core of the aestheticist conception of art is the assertion that art can only be appropriately examined on its own terms. To attempt to abstract an ethical message from a work of art is to reduce it to that message. Art is not art, then, but a neutered vehicle for saying something. Rather than reduce the importance of art by forcing ethics into the equation, we should simply ask: Does this work? To paraphrase Oscar Wilde: There is no such thing as a moral or immoral work of art; it is either well-done, or it isn’t. That is all.

A more moderate position allows that ethical concerns may or may not have a bearing on art, depending on the circumstances. If a piece invites ethical dialogue, as does Picasso’s indictment of the Spanish Civil war in “Guernica,” we should meditate on that while we experience the work. Except in similar cases, however, it makes little sense to compare ethical apples to aesthetic oranges. Ethics becomes a conditional property of art in this conception, worthy of consideration where the subject matter invites it but not essential to good art.

Comprising a third school of thought, moralist evaluators of art contend that art that violates ethical norms becomes aestheti-
cally suspect. How can it be quality art if it hurts someone? What if art causes psychological or emotional distress? What obligations does a photographer have to his or her subjects if the photograph depicts their vulnerability? Can we realistically evaluate a work on its own terms when the work has helped perpetrate negative action? Do the formal virtues of “Triumph of the Will,” a film which expertly glorifies Hitler, excuse the terrible aims of the filmmakers?

It is only recently that the intersection of ethical inquiry and aesthetic judgment has received a sustained formal dialogue. During the twentieth century, the modern and contemporary art movements expanded what may be considered art. Currently, there are few restrictions on artistic media, and this suggests that ethics and art need to be considered together. Should morally transgressive art be allowed to probe elements of the social psyche that would otherwise be off limits? Some contend that moral transgression actually enhances artistic value. But what happens when part of an art “piece” is alive: a flock of birds? A feral dog? A child? What if an artist kills an animal specifically to make an artwork? Can art be both morally reprehensible and artistically pure?

While most of the debates about intersections of art and ethics occur with respect to how ethics informs art, we suggest that it is worthwhile to consider how art colors ethics as well. Art may give people a more immediate link to ethics than a traditional abstract dialogue or case study. In this way, art is perhaps the ideal vehicle for ethical ideas. Because our aesthetic selves and our rational selves do not fully overlap, art can tell us something that experience may never be able to teach. We may repeatedly try and fail to grasp the consequences of our actions towards others outside our immediate view until we see it rendered hyper-real in an artwork. In other words, because art provides us with imaginative experiences, it may excite our moral imaginations more directly and fully than rational dialogue.
The intentional fusion of art and ethics travels a fine line. Good art probably illuminates without resorting to didacticism; art laden with a rote ethical message often becomes bad art. If it fails to inform the aesthetic self, it will certainly fail to resonate with an audience. On the other hand, a message cannot be so buried in conceptual ambiguity that it ceases to be a message at all. In other words, good art may lead to sloppy ethics; good ethics may make substandard art.

“Good” art is art that connects with us on emotional and rational levels, making it difficult to tell the difference between the two. That exciting mixture of our aesthetic and moral selves is what we hope you experience when interacting with this exhibit.

The visual studies presented in this exhibition provide different spaces for examining life—its complexities, its puzzles, and its joys. Importantly, these works accomplish this goal in ways that do not preach or suggest a moral distillation prepackaged for visual consumption. They are opening lines for multiple conversations about how we should live, encompassing focused—if ambiguous—questions about inequality or the nature of authority and fundamental statements about the impermanence of human constructions—both physical and social.

In keeping with the mission of the Kenan Institute for Ethics, the What Is Good Art? Exhibition provides an opportunity for dialogue but does not dictate the conclusions participants draw from the experience. The Institute promotes ethical thinking and action at Duke, in Durham, and around the world. Ethics is something we all share. The purpose of this competition and exhibition is to share ethics and art with a wider community, to start conversations in new spaces and in new ways.

The distinguished panel of judges that juried this show evaluated individual submissions based on their technical
proficiency, quality of thought, and—most importantly—the degree to which each piece made strong artistic and ethical statements. While the panel looked for artistic and ethical sophistication, they also chose pieces that sparked disagreement. Indeed, the judging panel chose some pieces precisely because they had diverse reactions to them.

We invite you to join this conversation. Artist statements appear next to each piece, and materials are available in the gallery to write down your reactions to each work in the show. What messages do you take away from the artwork in this exhibit? Which pieces speak to you most directly, and what do they say?

As you walk through the gallery, you will see that the pieces have been organized thematically. As with the artworks themselves, the gallery’s layout is meant to be the beginning of a process of thinking and talking about the topics raised by the works in this exhibition. You may find you have very different thoughts and reactions to each piece than what the artists envisioned or that we as curators have outlined below—in fact, we hope you do! What follows are thoughts collected from the judges and curators of this show. We hope these interpretive guideposts facilitate a deeper appreciation for the works in the show and the issues they raise, whether your reactions coincide with the thoughts outlined here or not.
Distinguished Panel of Judges

William Fick,
Visiting Assistant Professor of the Practice of Visual Arts

Margaret Mertz,
Executive Director, Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts

Louise Meintjes,
Associate Professor of Music

Noah Pickus,
Nannerl O. Keohane Director, Kenan Institute for Ethics

Thomas S. Rankin,
Director, Duke Center for Documentary Studies

Kimerly Rorschach,
Mary D.B.T. and James H. Semans Director of the Nasher Museum

Suzanne Shanahan,
Associate Director, Kenan Institute for Ethics

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong,
Chauncey Stillman Professor in Practical Ethics in the Department of Philosophy and the Kenan Institute for Ethics
The Exhibition

From left to right, Stephanie Vara, The Dinner; and Michael McCreary, The Wedding Planter

Stephanie Vara’s The Dinner and Michael McCreary’s Wedding Planter play with ritual and notions of bounty. The place setting in Vara’s installation makes an explicit contrast between the relative security and abundance the developed world enjoys and the scarcity of those resources outside of the Western core. This story is deceptively simple, however, masking disparities in those same resources within supposedly bountiful regions. By using the map as a placemat, disparities in portions are not only stark but also rude, an intentional slight on the part of the host. McCreary’s framing of a Guatemalan girl taking part in a wedding ceremony presents a different take on ritual. He has isolated the figure from the rest of the crowd, removing her from her surroundings. We do not seem to be invited into this scene as we are in Vara’s piece. McCreary juxtaposes the human element of this ceremony, in which trees are planted to symbolize life and permanence, with the harvested trees in the background.
The next four works—Colin Heasley’s *Stop Signage*, Rui Dong’s *Sight*, Stanislas Colodiet’s *John Fitzgerald Kennedy*, and Sarah Zhang’s *So What Does Honor Mean to You*—all interrogate transgression in some way. According to Heasley, *Stop Signage* indicts the desire for permanent youth that social norms impress upon women in particular. However, like most of the works in the show, it can be read multiple ways; the combination of medium and message seemed to more than one judge to be more of a commentary on date rape. Dong’s photograph of a school-age Indian girl requires the viewer to confront the ethical issues inherent in documentary photography. Looking at the image, the viewer feels caught, guilty, uncomfortably voyeuristic. Colodiet subverts hero worship with his portrait of one of America’s most iconic presi-
dents. Here, the subject is treated in a way that breaks down the Kennedy mythology. Kennedy looks at us in a familiar pose, but he is stripped of the glamour we assume he (or his office) deserves. Zhang’s installation invites the audience to participate in transgression on multiple levels. The work is completed when people walk across it, defying traditional rules of proper behavior in a gallery and symbolically defiling the concept of honor.

The clash of old and new connects Maria Isabel Arroyo’s The Inevitable, Andrea Coravos’s Berlin Olympiastadion, Zach Blas’s Queer Technologies, and Michael McCreary’s Tension in Yellow. Arroyo’s five-part work displays the degradation of human constructions, suggesting that times change
and that human attempts at permanence are misplaced. **Coravos**’s image of the Olympic stadium in Berlin speaks to an enduring feature of humanity—how our desire to identify with a group spurs competition. The photo has a surreal quality, however, suggesting in a subtle way that now things are different—brighter, more connected. Today one can be a partisan in a football match taking place in Germany from almost anywhere in the world. **Zach Blas**’s impressively detailed installation invites participants to confront the way in which communication and lifestyle have changed. These changes reinforce each other and suggest that we evaluate traditional ways of thinking and communicating. Elements of the installation straddle the line between serious criticism and playful mockery, using the language and logic of technology-driven consumerism from the perspective of an outsider. Finally, **McCreary**’s striking image isolates two traditional forms of authority in one statement. The two are spatially far apart in the image, but how different are they conceptually?

![Image](image.jpg)

From left to right, Jonathan Anderson, *Never Again*; and Jessica So and Tiffany Pao, *Have You Stepped Outside Your Box?*

**Jonathan Anderson**’s photograph entitled *Never Again* and the installation, *Have You Stepped Outside Your Box?* by **Jessica So** and **Tiffany Pao** both suggest the confining presence of convention in very different settings. In **Anderson**’s photograph, the battlefield dead from World War I are buried with the same military formality in which the soldiers themselves may have exhibited when going off to war. The evenly spaced
grave markers remind the viewer of the immense scale of life lost to violence. The title strikes an ironic note, however: The very fact that we refer to World War I implies World War II. So and Pao’s work invites us to literally look in the mirror and confront the norms that give our lives coherence. Particularly for students, finding a “place” in the academic community can be both an immense source of comfort and a barrier to continued growth. We crave “boxes,” delimited spaces we understand and over which we have agency. However, those zones can make us deaf to the voices of others.

The final three works, Jonathan Anderson’s *Streets of Savannah*, Marissa Bergmann’s *Veins and Brains*, and Kirstie Jeffrey’s stop-motion video *Love, Love, Love* all strike hopeful notes, reminding us that living ethically is not a chore. At
the same time, each piece is highly open to interpretation. The man in Anderson’s photograph makes his livelihood selling a traditional craft on the sidewalk in an old Southern city. We may suppose it is a tenuous existence but also a dignified one. One might ask how much responsibility we collectively bear for the lives and livelihoods of others. Bergmann’s piece sees connections in nature that we cannot normally see. What other connections link across nature, beyond our notice? Finally, Jeffrey’s whimsical video reminds us of the joy of human connections. Without featuring any people, she evokes the longing and ecstasy of romantic love.
What Is Good Art?
An exploration of ethics and aesthetics

Exhibition in the Fredric Jameson Gallery

April 5, 2010 - May 16, 2010

What Is Good Art? is a production of Team Kenan, an initiative of the Kenan Institute for Ethics in which an energetic group of students brainstorm, design, and implement programs that highlight ethics in creative ways for the Duke Community.

Catering for opening night gala provided by parker and otis