# Shock and art

by Cliff Edwards in the October 18, 2003 issue

*Transgressions: The Offenses of Art.* By Anthony Julius. University of Chicago Press, 272 pp., $35.00.

In word and image this volume tells the story of "transgression" as a movement in the visual arts, from Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in the 1860s to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (a urinal) of 1917 to Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* of 1987 and Marisa Carnesky's *Jewess Tatooess* of 2000. The "transgressive" has a wide range of meanings, from offenses against God, to violating pieties and taboos, to erasing or exceeding accepted boundaries.

We might well expect, therefore, that this book's almost 200 images from 1860 to the present will disturb viewers. Among the images are mutilated humans and animals, decaying corpses, blood, urine, feces, acts of sacrilege, sexual violence and torture. There is something in these pages to threaten, shock, offend, disgust or anger almost everyone. The serious question posed by the author is whether such breaches of rules and limits in art do more to shatter our illusions and liberate us from confining prejudices or to demoralize both artists and viewers, perhaps signaling the end of art itself.

Anthony Julius, an eminent lawyer and lecturer, began this inquiry years ago by examining the question of censorship in the arts. He then expanded his research to "art crimes," and finally wrote this careful history of transgressive art in the West. Julius does far more than appeal to our visual curiosity or prurient interests. He puts his legal expertise to use in analyzing the many varieties of transgressive art, from experiments in art-making that expand art's own accepted materials and subjects, to an art of taboo-breaking that seeks to violate the beliefs and sentiments of its audience. In a minor key, he examines art that challenges the rule of the state, art that has had very limited success. What interests Julius the most is the art that violates the tacit prohibitions and loyalties we might call pieties and taboos.

After presenting his typology of transgressive art, Julius analyzes the three basic defenses that have been used both in and out of court to justify such art--the

"estrangement" defense, the "formalist" defense and the "canonic" defense. The formalists place the focus upon art's self-absorption in explorations of form; canonists explain provocative works by locating them within the broader traditions that were once counted transgressive but are now accepted. The estrangement defense is of most interest to Julius, and the larger part of the volume focuses upon artworks that see their task as "shocking us into grasping some truth about ourselves, or about our world, or about art itself."

Such art succeeds by alienating us, exposing our prejudices, sabotaging our habits. So Manet's *Olympia*, a naked prostitute in a classic pose, stares back at us, unmasking the centuries of male dominance and voyeurism disguised as an interest in the artistic nude of myth and history. And Judy Chicago's *Red Fla*g, showing a woman's hand pulling a bloodied tampon from her body, crosses boundaries of decorum to assert the right of women to affirm their own experiences as "high art."

Julius's discussion demonstrates a broad and deep reading of aesthetics, semiotics and postmodern theory. He makes heavy demands on the reader, citing the views of Kant, Hegel, Croce, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Bataille, Derrida, Habermas, Kristeva, Bakhtin, Barthes and Shklovosky, stretching the imagination and challenging the intellect. Julius's sensitivity to his own Judaic background and his understanding of Christian themes allows him also to cite the interplay of law and transgression in biblical texts, as in Paul's assertion that Christians have "died to the law." His typology of transgressive forms of art may, in fact, suggest the possibility of a similar typology of the conflicting strategies in biblical interpretation and theology.

But what is the outcome of Julius's study? He suggests that we have arrived at the paradoxical situation where transgressions have become so exaggerated and so common that transgression itself has become the new establishment, the new canon. How is one to transgress the establishment of transgression? For some, it is through a return to classical forms; to others, this quandary suggests we have come to the end of art.

For Julius, the problem of art-making in response to the Holocaust is a critical test, one that leads to a break with the exhausted art of transgression. He believes there is a dawning realization of the inadequacy of images in the face of such a horrendous event entailing immense suffering. Perhaps an art of heartbreak is now about to replace the art of taboo-violation. We might add to Julius's prediction the suggestion that an art sensitive to its own vulnerability could also open the way to a

rebirth of theologically relevant religious art in forms awaiting our discovery.