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Breaking the Rules

*Artistic Expressions of
Transgression*

The *Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference* was founded in 2013 to publish a selection of the best papers presented at the biennial LUCAS Graduate Conference, an international and interdisciplinary humanities conference organized by the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS). The peer reviewed journal aims to publish papers that combine an innovative approach with fresh ideas and solid research, and engage with the key theme of LUCAS, the relationship and dynamics between the arts and society.

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INTRODUCTION

Titled 'Breaking the Rules! Cultural Reflections on Political, Religious and Aesthetic Transgressions', the third biannual LUCAS Graduate Conference took place on 29-30 January 2015. Historian of science Lorraine Daston (Max Planck Institute, Berlin) and medievalist Barbara H. Rosenwein (Loyola University Chicago) delivered the keynote lectures, respectively on 'Rules, Models, and Paradigms: Before Rules Became Rigid' and 'Breaking Emotion Rules: The Case of Margery Kempe's Religious Feelings'. Some forty-five graduate speakers from thirty universities around the world gathered for this occasion, which was closely aligned with LUCAS' interdisciplinary, cross-cultural research orientations and methods.

Dealing chiefly with writings on politics, religion, and philosophy, an initial collection of five articles, derived from among the best conference papers, was published last year under the title 'Breaking the Rules: Textual Reflections on Transgression' (*JLGC* 4, 2016). Topics were as varied as they were thought-provoking: the use of Adoptionist debates for theological, geopolitical, and personal purposes within the Carolingian Empire; the subversive potential of reported female speech in the canonical Gospels; Catholic and Protestant approaches to penance through the reception of a late fourteenth-century Middle Dutch treaty; varied perceptions of dance by pagan and Christian authorities from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages; and Lucretius' explo-

ration of the sublime, used to both understand natural phenomena, and challenge political and intellectual oppression in the Roman Republic. All articles discussed the complex experience of rule-breaking in written records, which often first defined the boundaries that would later be transgressed. Between head-on refutations and more subtle challenges, these multifaceted analyses offered a first step in pursuing the reflections set in motion during the conference.

The current selection features another six excellent articles stemming from the 2015 conference, this time focusing on artistic expressions contemplating the act of transgression. Featuring not only traditional methods, such as painting, but also relatively recent forms, such as zines and performance art, this second set of articles delves afresh into the act of rule-breaking in, and through, the visual arts. Spotlighting mixed artistic media provides the groundwork for this complementary shift in thinking about transgression: as Marshall McLuhan argued in his now-famous expression, “the medium is the message”, the contents of any message spread via a particular medium cannot be analysed without also taking the specifics of that medium into account.¹ In the artistic expressions featured in this issue of the *JLGC*, the medium might not be the whole message, but it can certainly be argued that the choice of medium heavily influences the effect of any transgression made through art: the conceptualisation, production, and reception of all artworks analysed in the collected articles are intrinsically linked to their physical forms.

Interested in the radical interplay between avant-garde art and American politics, David Murrieta Flores illustrates how a group of young artists, called Black Mask, strove to subvert the cultural and societal paradigms in New York City during the 1960s. Headed by Ben Morea, this militant performative group revived and appropriated principles typical of movements such as surrealism, futurism, and Dadaism, which had already angled for an amalgamation of politics and aesthetics. Published in zine format, the art of Black Mask aimed to

1 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

destroy all traditional artistic and ethical values, such as the primacy of the Western world, the white man, capitalism, and the idea of 'progress'. After disappearing at the end of the 1960s, Black Mask transformed into Up Against the Wall Motherfucker (also known as the Family), which was less organized and more violent in nature. This new group, a 'street gang with analysis', even took direct action in the Lower East Side, pushing their initial agenda further. By referring to Native Americans as a symbol of resistance, the Motherfuckers aspired to be a primitivistic, and thus anti-modern, avant-garde, and against perceived bourgeois ideologies. With continued reflection on art and society, the group evolved into yet another collective, the International Werewolf Conspiracy, incorporating elements of modernism, romanticism, and pop culture.

Similarly reflecting on the fusion of art and society, as well as the performative aspect of transgression, Aisling Reid discusses the function of the eye and vision in transgressing both material boundaries and role restrictions. She focuses on late medieval Italy, where several cases of iconoclasm were triggered by people's fear of punishment by representations of the Madonna and saints whom they had allegedly offended by sinning in front of their images. This practice of eye-gouging and defacement of religious representations is not dismissed as a mere instantiation of superstition, but is rather interpreted as a consequence of specific dynamics involving the portrait, its referent, and the gazer. As modern theorists such as Alfred Gell show, the attribution of agency to a character's iconic representation is a current cognitive phenomenon. The viewer does not stop at the visible signs of a work of art (the so-called 'immediate object'), but goes beyond them by attributing the referent's characteristics directly to his portrayal, which becomes a 'dynamic object'. With exemplary case studies of an ever-present phenomenon, Reid shows that eyes act as a threshold through which vitality and agency enter the concrete world of the observer from the ideal dimension to which the portrayed referent belongs. Such dynamics could also be used by the gazer to limit the agency of the artwork by altering its visual capabilities, so as to 'close the door' to interaction-

More broadly, Reid also touches upon the use of physical violence as a means of personal expression, which is in these cases a pre-emptive measure against divine retribution, through which the iconoclasts conferred power and agency to seemingly inanimate objects.

Beth Hodgett likewise ponders the function and signification of violence in relation to the body, in the contexts of religion and spirituality, where it can serve as a vehicle by which to transcend one's status. She offers a new reading of Francesco Del Cairo's *The Martyrdom of St Agnes* by drawing on George Bataille's theories of transgression. The seventeenth-century painting by Del Cairo depicts St Agnes as she is being stabbed in the breast by an attacker while trying to protect her virginity. Hodgett explains how, to Bataille, humans are fundamentally discontinuous beings. Communication or experiencing continuity and intimacy with 'the other' is only possible through acts which might lead to a separate existence of the self, such as erotic and mystical experiences. Within medieval female mysticism, Hodgett argues, this disruption of the intact self and the search for continuity (through the divine) is often symbolized by the physical wound. This can be attested, for instance, in the popular contemplation of the Wounds of Christ or the phenomenon of the stigmata. Hodgett applies these insights to *The Martyrdom of St Agnes*; by giving attention to the swooning state of Agnes in the picture, she shows how violence and eroticism are fused together and suggests that the laceration of Agnes' skin can be interpreted as a symbolic sexual penetration. Here the painting allows us a glimpse of a transgressive, even transcendent moment. The violence ruptures the boundaries, not only of the body, but also of the divide between human and divine.

The transgressive potential of female sexuality and eroticism in the treatment of religious figures can also be observed in a series of paintings by Marlene Dumas, titled *Magdalena* (1995-96), which is explored by Timea Lelik. The series in question counts eight portraits of Mary Magdalene, of which Lelik

analyses two emblematic pieces: *Magdalena (Newmans's Zip)* and *Magdalena (Manet's Queen/Queen of Spades)* (both 1995). A commonly featured biblical figure in the art historical canon, Mary Magdalene has been the object of an ambivalent overall portrayal, ranging from prostitute to saint. Providing first an overview of earlier literary and pictorial representations in the Christian tradition, Lelik argues that Dumas transgresses traditional depictions of Mary Magdalene, consequently challenging female subjectivity in art, and departing from the usual religious concerns. Calling for a deconstruction of Western portraiture, Lelik bolsters her analysis by exploring perceptions of female nudity in Dumas' work in relation to referenced works such as Manet's, the painterly methods applied by the artist in the *Magdalena* series, and the contextualization of the entire series within Dumas' oeuvre.

Combining a similar interest in the adaptation and reinterpretation of a canon through variations in form, albeit in textual instead of visual sources, Rena Bood investigates the theme of rule-breaking in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the way in which it is handled by its eighteenth-century Dutch translators. She argues that free will and capability are central to Milton's description of Eve (the 'Rule-breaker in Chief'), since they are needed to make her fall from divine grace a meaningful event. Two of Milton's Dutch translators, Jakobus van Zanten and Lambertus Paludanus, however, see Eve in a different light, based on their perceptions of women and female sexuality: rather than focusing on her intellectual capacities, they see Eve as a primarily physical being, whose disobedience of God is part of the source material, but ultimately lacks any real significance. Where Milton's Eve breaks the rules by conscious choice, her counterpart in the translations does so because the traditional narrative compels her to. This casts an entirely different light on a character whose rule-breaking is perhaps the most significant in Christianity's collective consciousness, and on the interpretations of Milton's work as a whole.

Rounding off this second collection of articles on the theme of rule-breaking, Looi van Kessel's paper is less about conscious transgression than the inevitability of breaking accepted social convention. He focuses on a performance artwork, *Timelining* (2014), by New York-based choreographers Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly, in which two actors perform a half-scripted, half-improvised dialogue while moving through a space. It is a work which compels its audience to think about the impossibility of total conformity or shared experience in any relationship, suggesting that however much two people might imagine themselves as a couple – a single unit – their memories and experiences will always run along separate paths which meet only to diverge again. All temporal experience is thus 'queered' and all intimate relationships inevitably transgress the absolute temporality assumed as the baseline of hetero-patriarchal normativity.

Beyond a common focus in method and general overarching theme, each of the featured articles contemplates how art can be used to express transgressive ideas, and how artworks, in doing so, in themselves can become physical, tangible acts of transgression. These discussions are also connected through a common interest in the entire process of rule-breaking, from the identity of the transgressors and their motivations, the nature of the rules broken and the status of the authorities contested, the political, social, economical, and artistic circumstances in which the transgressions occur, to the positive and negative consequences of the acts. What results is a complex patchwork of different transgressions unquestionably tied to their specific contexts, but also – and perhaps more interestingly – connected to one another through their belonging on the broad and colourful spectrum of human experience.

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Karine Laporte, Fleur Praal, Yves van Damme, Andrea De March, Nynke Feenstra, Renske Janssen, Elizabeth Mitchell, and Sara Polak

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