

## Case 11: Mind over Matter?

On April 29, 2017, the Ditchling Museum of ART + CRAFT opened a new exhibit: *Eric Gill: The Body*. Gill was one of the finest British artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; his sculptures stand in buildings across the world, including Westminster Cathedral (London) and the United Nations Building (NYC). His sculptures, engravings, and drawings permanently reside in prestigious museums. According to Ditchling’s web page, “[w]ithin Gill’s work, the human body is of central importance; this major exhibition asks whether knowledge of Gill’s disturbing biography affects our enjoyment and appreciation of his depiction of the human figure.”<sup>109</sup> The “disturbing biography” referred to is Gill’s sexual abuse of his two oldest daughters during their teens.

Prior to mounting the exhibition, Ditchling’s director, Nathaniel Hepburn, convened a workshop that included academics, museum professionals and curators, critics, and journalists to consider not whether, but how, the exhibition might usefully examine this sexual abuse. Journalist Rachel Cooke, a workshop participant, queries: “For me, though, the biggest question remains unanswered: why do this show at all? The darkneses in Gill’s life have been public knowledge... [since] 1989. It is not as though this information is secret. Why force it on visitors?”<sup>110</sup>

Certainly some viewers will be distressed—perhaps mightily distressed—to see sculptures and engravings of the abused daughters, executed during the periods of their abuse. For example, abuse survivors may experience flashbacks of their abuse. Members of the more general public are likely to experience feelings of disgust and repugnance in learning how Gill came to acquire such intimate knowledge of his subjects’ bodies. Abusers themselves may view their own behavior as validated upon learning that a great artist produced brilliant work as a result of his sexual abuse of minors. Indeed, one post on the museum’s Facebook page notes: “Voyeurism is not art - your exhibition feeds the poisoned minds of child molesters - for the safety of all young bodies and souls at risk - I insist you remove these images.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> “Eric Gill: The Body,” *Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft*, June 6, 2017, <http://www.ditchlingmuseumartcraft.org.uk/event/eric-gill-body/>.

<sup>110</sup> Rachel Cooke, “Eric Gill: Can We Separate the Artist from the Abuser?,” *The Guardian*, June 9, 2017, [https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/09/eric-gill-the-body-ditchling-exhibition-rachel-cooke?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/09/eric-gill-the-body-ditchling-exhibition-rachel-cooke?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other).

<sup>111</sup> Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft Facebook Page, June 9, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/museumartcraft/reviews/>.

Why, then, bring up the abuse at all? Why not just show Gill's work without mentioning this aspect of his personal history? The relationship of artists' personal lives to their works has long been a vexed question that remains unsettled. Director Hepburn responds: "Museums have a duty to talk about difficult issues. They are a place where society can think. There is some public benefit in organisations like ours not turning a blind eye to abuse."<sup>112</sup>

Moreover, the American Association of Museum Curators' Code of Ethics lists as curators' first value "[t]o serve the public good by contributing to and promoting learning, inquiry, and dialogue, and by making the depth and breadth of human knowledge available to the public."<sup>113</sup> The Code adds that curators' interpretive responsibilities include: "When possible and appropriate, [curators] accurately and respectfully represent the creator's perspective."<sup>114</sup> The Code does not address who is/might be the arbiter(s) of "the public good", or the exact nature of this good.

Finally, the issue of self-censorship arises: If museums themselves censor exhibitions' content by choosing to omit objects viewers might find offensive, the public will be deprived of art that, at least according to some art experts, has aesthetic value— Robert Mapplethorpe's photos come to mind here.

Case from the 2017 Regional Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl.  
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<sup>112</sup> Cooke.

<sup>113</sup> American Association of Museums Curators Committee "A Code of Ethics for Curators," *American Alliance of Museums*, June 9, 2017, <http://aam-us.org/docs/continuum/curcomethics.pdf?sfvrsn=0>.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*