

Crime or Creation?: Iconoclasm in the Name of Art

Helen E. Scott

There are many different situations in which members of the public assault works of art in museums and galleries. Political agitators may slash paintings to draw greater attention to their causes, while religious followers may wreck installations that they deem to be blasphemous in an attempt to reverse the perceived offence. Children may scribble graffiti on pictures if they are not sufficiently engaged by museum displays, while pensioners may harm avant-garde sculptures that they do not consider 'artistic'. An iconoclast can be anyone in society, and motives are diverse in their range. Sometimes even artists become assailants.

On 28th February 1974 a young artist entered the Museum of Modern Art in New York and spray-painted the words "KILL LIES ALL" onto Pablo Picasso's 1937 painting *Guernica*.¹ Although the specific meaning of this unusual message remains unclear, its author, Tony Shafrazi, was careful to clarify his intention. He had not struck because he was jealous of Picasso's success, nor was he protesting from a conservative standpoint that *Guernica* was unworthy of praise. Shafrazi was not even demonstrating a rejection of the artistic accomplishments of his predecessors. Instead, the artist wanted "to bring the art absolutely up to date, to retrieve it from art history and give it life".² Shafrazi said that he was making the 'hackneyed' image relevant again, obliging people to look at it afresh. Entering into a creative dialogue with Picasso, he did not see himself to be damaging the work, but enhancing it; his '*Guernica* action' was an innovative contribution to Picasso's legacy. In short, Shafrazi's gesture was a work of art in its own right.

Since this attack, and particularly within the last fifteen years, there has been a proliferation of cases where iconoclasts have claimed to be creating either conceptual or performance art through their actions. Not only has this type of assault become more prevalent, it has also proved extremely difficult for cultural institutions to suppress. The phenomenon

has blurred the boundaries between crime and creation, and thereby engendered a serious problem for the museum sector. This paper investigates acts of 'artistic' iconoclasm, tracing the roots of the matter before examining some key case studies. It highlights the difficulties that galleries face in responding to incidents, and concludes with a set of recommendations.

The vague romantic notion of the affinity between artistic creation and artistic destruction is commonly held. As Brian Dillon says, the idea that "there is something subconscious and inspired at work is the cultural trope that links artist and iconoclast in a strange doubling".³ This popular concept may have some substance. Vernon Allen and David Greenberger state that the variables which make artistic creation a pleasurable experience echo those responsible for the enjoyment derived from destructive behaviour.⁴ Accordingly, it would be natural for someone engaged in one activity to be attracted to the other. This proposal appears to be supported by the theory and practice that have shaped the development of modern art. Since the nineteenth century there have been avant-garde movements committed to renouncing the efforts of forebears in a resolute and even vitriolic way. In terms of context, this provides the initial foundations for acts of iconoclasm undertaken in the name of art.

Jacques Louis David's pupils were among the first to talk about rejecting the art of the past through destruction. Maurice Quay allegedly called for the Louvre to be burned down on the grounds that museums corrupt artistic taste.⁵ A century later, his rebellious sentiments were reiterated by the Italian Futurists. "Turn aside the canals to flood the museums!", urged Filippo Marinetti in 1909, "Oh, the joy of seeing the glorious old canvases bobbing adrift on those waters, discoloured and shredded! ... Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly!".⁶ The Futurists believed that a prerequisite to artistic progression was the destruction of the past and its attributes: libraries, opera houses, theatres, and museums. In their bid to revolutionise the cultural landscape, they did not wish to be influenced or compromised by the achievements of their predecessors, and they advocated that superseding artists should likewise cast Futurism aside. The Suprematist Kazimir Malevich responded in his 1915 manifesto, proclaiming: "We have abandoned futurism, and we, bravest of the brave, *have spat on the altar of its art*".⁷ In subsequent years, proponents of other avant-garde movements also embraced hostile rhetoric, though the destruction of which they spoke remained metaphorical.⁸

In 1919 Marcel Duchamp took this oedipal conflict one step further

when he produced *L.H.O.O.Q.* This work consists of an image of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, to which Duchamp applied a moustache and beard. It does not just symbolise Duchamp's irreverent rejection of his forebears. Although *L.H.O.O.Q.* was made by defacing a mass-produced reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* and not the real painting, the suggestion is implicit that mutilating an actual artwork could be a valid form of artistic expression.

Robert Rauschenberg finally broke the taboo of ruining an original artwork for his own creative purposes in 1953. To produce *Erased de Kooning Drawing, 1953*, Rauschenberg spent four weeks methodically erasing an image by Willem de Kooning, which he then framed and exhibited in New York. Being interviewed in May 1976, Rauschenberg explained that, despite his admiration for de Kooning, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* had been an attempt to "purge" himself of his artistic teaching.⁹ His subversion sparked controversy. As with most modern episodes of 'artistic' iconoclasm, Rauschenberg asserted that he was working collaboratively with the original artist. Crucially, though, Rauschenberg had acted with de Kooning's permission; he had been gifted a drawing for this very function. The experiment encouraged other artists to explore the creative potential of destruction, either disfiguring artworks that they owned or mutilating their own efforts.¹⁰

Neither the metaphorical iconoclasm of the early twentieth century, nor the radical but legally sanctioned activities of Duchamp and Rauschenberg provide direct precursors to modern incidents of 'artistically' motivated damage. However, these developments established the origins of the problem. They opened the door to the possibility of harming the work of great artists and creating new art from the experience.

The other main contextual root of this phenomenon is the avant-garde trend away from conventional modes of artistic expression. Early experiments with *objet trouvés* and conceptual installations were important markers in this progression. Yet it was the birth of performance art that ultimately enabled artists to escape the fixed traditions of painting and sculpture.¹¹ To quote RosaLee Goldberg, performance art is "a permissive, open-ended medium with endless variables, executed by artists impatient with the limitations of more established art forms, and determined to take their art directly to the public".¹² With such a "boundless manifesto", the growth of performance challenged the formal frontiers of art, so that the physical realisation of an idea or human bodily gestures could be considered as artistry. Although performance was not recognised as an art form until the 1970s, aspects of theatricality featured in avant-garde circles

throughout the twentieth century. The medium's anarchist qualities are also worth noting. Early performances of the Italian Futurists often resulted in violence and arrests.¹³ Moreover, on occasion, performance incorporated self-destructive elements. In February 1960 Jim Dine performed *The Smiling Workman* at the Judson Memorial Church in New York. This piece involved the artist drinking from paint jars while working on a large canvas, which he finally destroyed by leaping through it.¹⁴ Once performance was established as a genuine artistic vehicle, the progression from this type of art to the unauthorised destruction of gallery exhibits was, perhaps, inevitable.

The evolution of these contextual threads places cultural institutions in a serious quandary. It seems hypocritical for museums to reject the legitimacy of iconoclastic gestures which are the progeny of theories and formal experiments that are celebrated as milestones in the history of modern art. But if museums recognise such assaults as innovative art, they undermine their custodial responsibilities and risk the safety of collections. This dilemma has grave consequences, as the outcome of the attack on *Guernica* illustrates. Despite having apprehended Tony Shafrazi, who willingly confessed to the crime, the Museum of Modern Art did not prosecute him. Museum officials presumably wished to avoid creating even more negative publicity. It is equally conceivable, though, that this non-committal stance derived from a sense of paralysis brought on by the ambiguity of the situation.

Following Shafrazi's attack there was a lull in high profile incidents of this nature. The problem re-emerged in 1993. On 24th August Pierre Pinoncelli disrupted an exhibition at the Carre d'Art in Nîmes by sprinkling liquid on a version of Duchamp's *Fountain* and hitting it with a hammer. Pinoncelli proclaimed his act to be a "urinal-happening".¹⁵

In some respects, this assault could have been anticipated. Pinoncelli was well-known for his outrageous brand of performance art. In 1969 he had attacked the French Culture Minister with a paint-filled water-pistol at an exhibition opening.¹⁶ *Fountain* was also a particularly apt focus for an 'artistic' attack. Duchamp advocated that any object could be a work of art, subject to the choice of the artist; he took ordinary mass-produced items and de-contextualised them to create 'readymades'. Conceived for exhibition in 1917, *Fountain* was the most infamous illustration of this theory.¹⁷ Pinoncelli felt that *Fountain* had since become an enshrined icon of art history, and so sought to liberate and reinvigorate it with a gesture emphasising its original function and physicality. Splashing the porcelain urinal

with liquid and striking it with a hammer served this purpose. It could even be argued that Pinoncelli's conduct related to Duchamp's concept of the 'reciprocal readymade', where a commodity elevated to the status of art at the artist's discretion may be demoted to its original function.¹⁸ Thus, *Fountain* was historically significant, and it appeared to invite further interventions.

Claiming that Duchamp would have appreciated it, Pinoncelli faxed news of his 'happening' to various art world personalities on 30th August 1993. His argument won some support. The artist Benjamin Vautier wrote to *Art Press* insisting that the magazine acknowledge the performance as a genuine work of art.¹⁹ Pinoncelli felt sufficiently justified that he repeated his action on 4th January 2006, striking the same version of *Fountain* with a hammer at the Centre Georges Pompidou.²⁰

The issue of 'artistic' iconoclasm divided the art world further in 1997, when the Russian artist Alexander Brener damaged Malevich's *Suprematism 1920-1927 (White Cross on Grey)* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. On 4th January Brener managed to evade security and spray-painted the canvas with a green dollar symbol. The gesture, he explained, was a performance protesting against "corruption and commercialism in the art world".²¹ He had intended his dollar symbol to appear as if nailed to Malevich's cross, drawing attention to the disproportionate emphasis on money in the art establishment. Although Brener was jailed, some believed his claims that he had been engaging in a creative dialogue with Malevich. Giancarlo Politi, the editor of *Flash Art*, asserted that Brener's metaphorical "mouth to mouth resuscitation" had enhanced *Suprematism 1920-1927*, endowing it with another layer of meaning.²² During the subsequent trial, even a Stedelijk curator was forced to admit that the attack could be seen as artistic, though he added that art should not transgress certain limits.²³

Others questioned the extent of Brener's expressive originality. The director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York repudiated his 'artistic' justifications because his 'art' was entirely reliant on Malevich's accomplishments.²⁴ Without *Suprematism 1920-1927* acting as a foil, Brener's efforts were meaningless; he was more a parasite than an artist.

Dario Gamboni highlights the inherent contradictions of this motive further. Performance artists may declare that their interventions liberate masterpieces, but attempting to forge a creative dialogue with a deceased artist necessarily imposes the performer's interpretation on the original artwork, which is hardly a promotion of freedom.²⁵ As a group of artists pointed out in 1974, after the disfigurement of *Guernica*,

“No one has the right to unilaterally and arrogantly ‘join’ another artist’s work”.²⁶

Iconoclasts who cite artistic justifications are not always motivated solely by aesthetic concerns; they may also be guided by the allure of public attention. In this regard, it is worth considering an incident that occurred in 1994 at the Serpentine Gallery. On 9th May Damien Hirst’s *Away From the Flock*, a vitrine holding a lamb suspended in formaldehyde, was damaged by a man who poured black ink into the tank.²⁷ Mark Bridger claimed to be on the same creative wavelength as Hirst, and said that he had acted to augment the work. “I was providing an interesting addendum”, he explained in court, “In terms of conceptual art, the sheep had already made its statement. Art is there for creation of awareness and I added to whatever it was meant to say”.²⁸

Before he was apprehended, Bridger had replaced the exhibit’s label with one reading: “Mark Bridger, *Black Sheep*, May 1, 1994”.²⁹ This final flourish reinforced the idea that he had devised a new piece of conceptual art. But it also introduced a tongue-in-cheek aspect to the affair. In parodying this gallery convention, Bridger might have been alluding to the perceived ridiculousness of contemporary art. His act may have been a publicity stunt that was already assured an audience by the interest that the exhibition had generated. Indeed, some 48,000 people visited the Serpentine Gallery while *Away From the Flock* was on display.³⁰ Since Bridger was not a well-established artist, unlike Pinoncelli or Brener, the artistic integrity of his act is difficult to gauge. However, it could be argued that Hirst went some way towards validating it. A book that Hirst produced in 1997 features an image of *Away From the Flock* with a moveable tab that causes the picture to become obscured, as if the tank has been filled with ink.³¹ While Bridger acted without permission, it appears that Hirst was not completely dismissive of *Black Sheep*.

Tracey Emin felt no such ambivalence towards the artistic duo that wrecked her installation *My Bed* in October 1999. In a performance entitled *Two Naked Men Jump Into Tracey’s Bed*, Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi Ianjun leaped onto Emin’s Turner Prize nominated exhibit and staged a pillow fight.³² They insisted that, while Emin’s work had been “strong”, they had “wanted to push the idea further”.³³ Emin denied resolutely that this was art, accusing the assailants of “gimmicky” publicity seeking. She chastised the Tate for not pressing charges and commented: “It was upsetting and disturbing – a criminal offence [...] I wouldn’t go round to someone’s house, smash up a coffee table and call that art”.³⁴ Nevertheless, some

oblivious bystanders met the unauthorised performance with polite applause, which shows how subjective the distinction between creation and destruction can be.

In 2002 Bruno Latour coined the term ‘iconoclasm’, meaning a scenario where “one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further inquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive”.³⁵ The phrase suitably encapsulates the events surrounding the display of the Chapman Brothers’ *Insult to Injury*, the most absurd demonstration to date of the ambiguity of ‘artistic’ iconoclasm.

Jake and Dinos Chapman provoked outrage in 2003 when they doctored a set of Francisco Goya’s etchings *The Disasters of War*.³⁶ The result, *Insult to Injury*, revealed eighty etchings of the Napoleonic invasion of Spain overlaid with watercolour and gouache additions: clown faces, puppy heads, and other grotesques. Although the Chapmans saw the work as a tribute to Goya, it prompted accusations of cultural destruction. Legally, the artists were beyond reproach because the etchings belonged to them. Modifying them may have been ethically dubious, but defacing their own property was within their rights. So when the series was attacked as a piece of performance art, the irony was lost on very few.

On 30th May 2003 Jake Chapman gave a lecture at Modern Art Oxford. While speaking, he was ambushed by an audience member who threw red paint at him and the etchings.³⁷ The assailant, Aaron Barschak, maintained the artistic merit of his offence. Barschak told police that he had been “collaborating” with the Chapmans, and intended to submit photographs of the incident to the Turner Prize competition. Presumably due to his reputation for instigating other publicity stunts, this explanation was dismissed in court and he was sentenced to a jail term. “This was not the creation of a work of art but the creation of a complete mess”, the judge concluded.³⁸

Whether or not Barschak’s gesture constituted art is irresolvable. The important factor in any of the aforementioned episodes is that the perpetrators, even if they were acting with a sense of irony, felt justified in claiming their intentions to be artistic. Their confidence suggests that they were aware of the ambiguity of their actions and the paralysing dilemma that they would impose on targeted galleries. Cultural institutions must confront this phenomenon on a practical level. And the increasing occurrence of cases indicates that they should do so with haste.

Currently, research into iconoclasm in museums is relatively unusual,

and studies that concentrate specifically on 'artistically' motivated damage are scarcer still. This means that galleries' responses are often handicapped by a lack of knowledge. It is crucial, therefore, that the museum sector takes initiative by encouraging individual institutions to keep thorough records of attacks and to share information and advice amongst themselves. Raising awareness should be a priority. With a more comprehensive understanding of the problem, galleries will be better placed to pinpoint situations where the risk of attack is greatest. Security enhancement can then be focused, so as not to waste valuable resources.

The sector must also consolidate and clarify its position on 'artistic' iconoclasm, in order that a uniform message may be delivered to potential perpetrators. Whatever the motivational premise, an assault on an exhibit always undermines the fundamental duty of galleries to preserve cultural artefacts for future generations. Artistic collaboration, modification, and destruction warrant recognition for their roles in the development of avant-garde art, but interference undertaken without the owner or guardian's consent is a criminal act.

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- 13 C. Tisdall and A. Bozzolla, *Futurism* (London: 1977) 12-14, 91-93.
- 14 Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 131.
- 15 Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, 280.
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- 18 Gamboni, 'Image to Destroy', 110.
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