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## **Banksy and the tradition of destroying art**

By Preminda Jacob  
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*Banksy, an anonymous England-based street artist, recently rigged a frame holding his “Girl With Balloon” to shred the picture after it sold at auction. In this informational text, Preminda Jacob discusses other artists who have similarly destroyed their work and the meaning behind their actions. As you read, take notes on why the author thinks some artists destroy their work.*

- [1] When the British street artist Banksy shredded his “Girl With Balloon” after it was purchased for US\$1.4 million at Sotheby’s, did he know how the art world would react?

Did he anticipate that the critics would claim that the work, in its partially shredded state, would climb in value to at least \$2 million? That the purchaser would not object and would instead rejoice?<sup>1</sup>



*“Banksy Girl and Heart Balloon” by Dominic Robinson is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0*

We have no way of really knowing, though the famously anonymous artist did suggest that the shredder malfunctioned: The painting was supposed to be fully shredded, not partially destroyed.

As an art historian, I view his act in a larger context — as the latest example of artists deploying guerrilla<sup>2</sup> tactics to expose their disdain for the critics, dealers, gallery owners and museum curators whom they depend on for their livelihood.

- [5] In shredding “Girl With Balloon,” Banksy seems to be pointing to a central absurdity of his graffiti art being treated as fine art. When it appears on city streets, anyone can vandalize it; now that the same images are in galleries and auction houses, they must be handled with white gloves.

But, as he may well know, the art market is far too wealthy and adaptable to be undone by a shredder.

In fact, we’ve seen the same pattern play out, time and again: An artist will launch a withering<sup>3</sup> critique and instead of taking offense, the market simply tightens its embrace.

### **The many versions of subversion**

Some of the most well-known of Banksy’s subversive<sup>4</sup> artistic predecessors were part of the early-20th century Dada movement.<sup>5</sup> One of their principal strategies involved denying the market of objects that could be commodified.<sup>6</sup>

1. **Rejoice (verb):** to feel or show great joy
2. referring to actions that are performed unexpectedly and usually without authorized permission
3. **Withering (adjective):** intended to make someone feel mortified or humiliated
4. **Subversive (adjective):** seeking or intended to undermine an established system

French-American artist Marcel Duchamp is perhaps the most well-known Dadaist. In 1917, his “Fountain,” a urinal laid on its back and remounted on a pedestal, was his first volley against the art market’s intellectual pretenses about art.

- [10] Duchamp wanted to force the art world to acknowledge that its judgments about quality were based on media hype and money rather than artistic innovation.

However, years later Duchamp admitted to the futility of his gesture.

“I threw... the urinal into their faces as a challenge,” he lamented,<sup>7</sup> “and now they admire [it] for [its] aesthetic beauty.”

In 1920, Francis Picabia, a Cuban-French Dadaist would follow Duchamp’s lead and participate in a performance purposefully designed to provoke the French art world.

Before a Parisian audience gathered at the Palais des Fêtes, Picabia unveiled a chalk drawing entitled “Riz au Nez” (“Rice on the Nose”). The artist’s friend, André Breton, one of the hosts of the event, then erased the drawing. The artwork lasted for just a couple hours and is now lost to history. The work’s title, it’s been noted, sounds too similar to “rire au nez” (“to laugh in one’s face”) to be coincidental.

- [15] In 1953, Robert Rauschenberg, who was then an up-and-coming American artist, plucked up the courage to ask Willem de Kooning, an established abstract expressionist, for one of his drawings. Rauschenberg didn’t tell de Kooning much — just that he intended to use it for an unusual project. Although de Kooning was disapproving, he acquiesced.<sup>8</sup>

After securing his gift, Rauschenberg proceeded, over the period of a month, to carefully erase all traces of the expressive pencil, charcoal and crayon drawing that de Kooning had put to paper.

Rauschenberg then re-titled the work, now preserved in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Art, “Erased de Kooning Drawing.”

Jean Tinguely’s auto-destructing work, “Homage to New York” (1960), is probably the closest parallel to Banksy’s stunt. Made of scrap found in New Jersey junkyards, the massive work — 27 feet high and 23 feet in length — was supposed to be a mechanical display, sort of like a Rube Goldberg device.<sup>9</sup>

The piece was set up in the sculpture garden of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, and those attending the show included collectors Walter Arensberg and John D. Rockefeller III, and artists John Cage, Mark Rothko and Robert Rauschenberg.

- [20] Tinguely briefly set the piece in motion — and then it burst into flames.

The Museum of Modern Art described the scene:

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5. a European art movement that challenged norms and favored the new and unusual  
6. something that can be sold or mass produced  
7. Lament (verb) to mourn something  
8. **Acquiesce (verb):** to accept something reluctantly but without protest  
9. a device that is unnecessarily complex in its design or construction

“... a meteorological trial balloon inflated and burst, colored smoke was discharged, paintings were made and destroyed, and bottles crashed to the ground. A player piano, metal drums, a radio broadcast, a recording of the artist explaining his work, and a competing shrill voice correcting him provided the cacophonous<sup>10</sup> sound track to the machine’s self-destruction – until it was stopped short by the fire department.”

Apart from a fragment from Tinguely’s “Homage” preserved in the MoMA collection, all that remains of the work is some choppy film footage.

It’s difficult to imagine anyone surpassing Tinguely’s sound-and-light spectacle.

- [25] But in 2001, Michael Landy of the Young British Artists group orchestrated the most comprehensive “art as destruction” work to date.

Titled “Break Down,” Landy placed objects on a conveyor belt running into a machine that pulverized them. In the process, he destroyed all of his belongings — 7,227 pieces in all — including his own paintings and the art of his Young British Artist peers.

## Guerrillas in the midst

These acts of destruction are motivated by the same impulse.

In the late 19th century, art production largely became untethered from patronage<sup>11</sup> offered by the church or the state, and artists turned to powerful art dealers for their livelihood.

But many found that the radical, critical aspect of the artistic act was severely compromised — or erased altogether — when the most well-known feature of a work became the dollar sign attached to it.

- [30] To many, the market symbolized nothing more than a void.

With the urban street as his studio and insurgency<sup>12</sup> as part of his artistic mission, Banksy’s graffiti often critiques institutions, such as the art museum, and authority figures like the police and the Queen of England.

Though the market value of his work has soared in recent years, Banksy continues to paint images in public spaces that make preservation near impossible — and even invite theft or defacement.

Still, as guerrilla theater, Banksy’s recent act will be tough to beat. It’s certainly his most subversive and penetrating public foray into the elite art marketplace.

But even with all his critique, the question continues to nag: Is Banksy complicit with the art market? The very society he undermines, one that feeds on spectacle, has made him famous and his art immensely profitable.

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10. **Cacophony** (*noun*): a harsh or jarring mixture of sounds

11. funding

12. **Insurgency** (*noun*): an act of protest

[35] In the wake of World War I, Dadaist artists made a practice of shocking their public audiences by wantonly<sup>13</sup> destroying their own artistic creations. The public soon learned to cheer them on, and to detach themselves from the attack artists were actively waging on their sensibilities.

A century later, at Sotheby's, the initial shock of a shredded "Girl With Balloon" dissipated quickly. The hype only grew. The market adapted.

Sotheby's has since released a statement declaring that the piece — renamed "Love is in the Bin" — is "the first artwork in history to have been created live during an auction."

*"Banksy and the tradition of destroying art" by Preminda Jacob, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, October 19, 2018. Copyright (c) The Conversation 2018, CC-BY-ND.*

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13. **Wanton** (*adjective*): done spitefully and unprovoked

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the central idea of the text?
  - A. Artists have realized that their art is more valuable when it's destroyed or performative, which has led to many shocking artistic performances.
  - B. The public is most moved by self-destructive art, as it can't be preserved or truly owned by anyone.
  - C. Artists have created destructive or shocking art to criticize the art world, but are instead celebrated by the art world.
  - D. Professional artists aren't capable of truly challenging the art world and market, as they directly benefit from it.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "I threw ... the urinal into their faces as a challenge,' he lamented, 'and now they admire [it] for [its] aesthetic beauty.'" (Paragraph 12)
  - B. "Made of scrap found in New Jersey junkyards, the massive work — 27 feet high and 23 feet in length — was supposed to be a mechanical display, sort of like a Rube Goldberg device." (Paragraph 18)
  - C. "In the process, he destroyed all of his belongings — 7,227 pieces in all — including his own paintings and the art of his Young British Artist peers." (Paragraph 26)
  - D. "The public soon learned to cheer them on, and to detach themselves from the attack artists were actively waging on their sensibilities." (Paragraph 35)
  
3. What is the author's overall purpose in the text?
  - A. to explore the motivations for Banksy, and other artists, to destroy their art
  - B. to show how artists have been able to increase the market value of their art
  - C. to reveal to readers how Banksy was able to destroy his own art after it sold
  - D. to show how the art world's interest is always changing and difficult to predict
  
4. How does has destructive or shocking art, according to the text, developed over time?
  - A. As more artists became popular throughout the world, new artists had to use shocking or destructive art to get the public's attention.
  - B. As the market value of art started to go down, artists no longer cared about how others perceived their work or if it could be preserved.
  - C. As technology developed over time, art was created and destroyed in new ways that shocked and intrigued the public.
  - D. As art became defined by its monetary value, artists used shocking or destructive acts to challenge people's assumptions and expectations about their art.

5. What is the relationship between artists and the market? Cite textual evidence to support your response.

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