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# Broken Images. Destruction Against the Idea of Beauty

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Description of the thesis  
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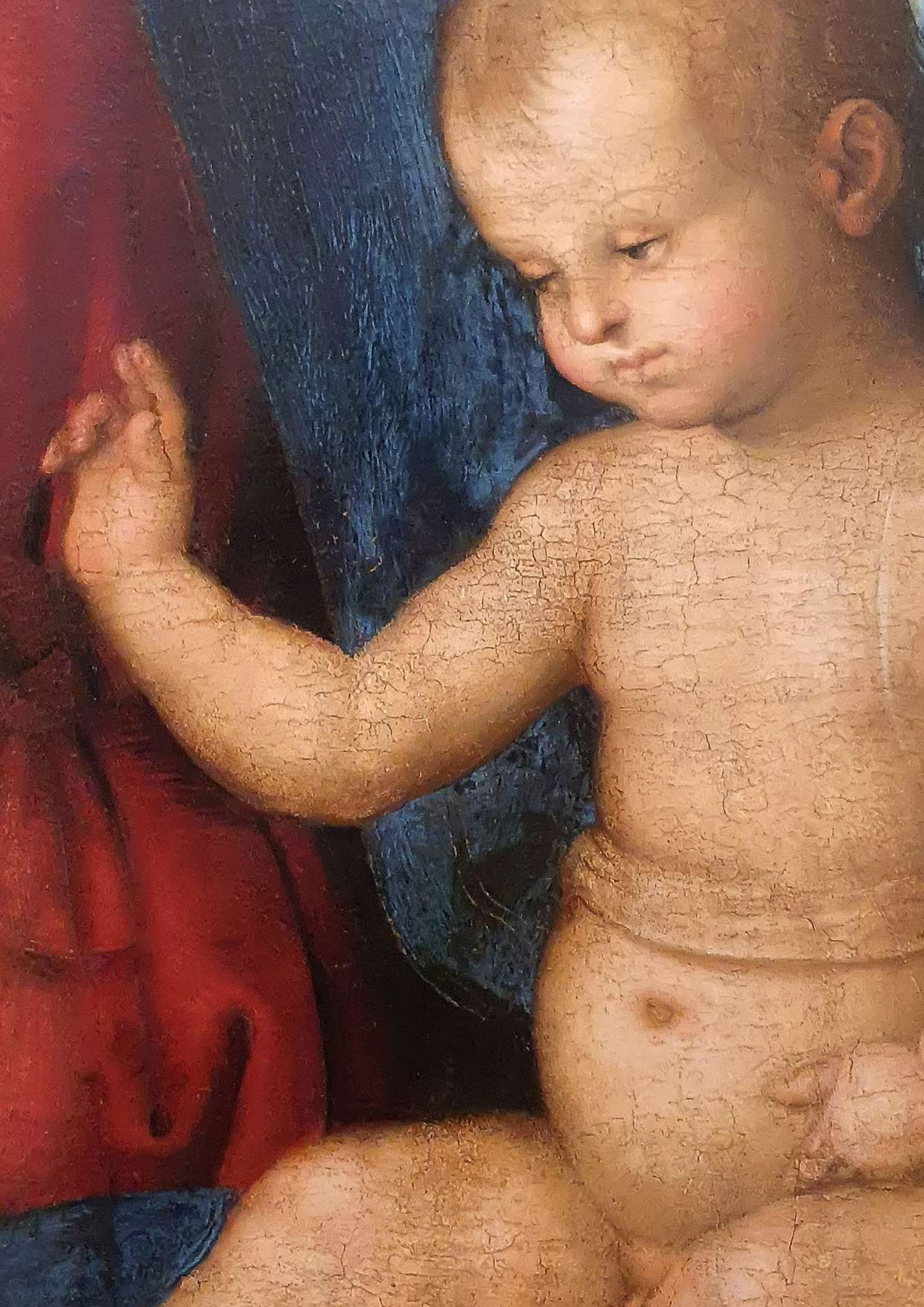
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# Introduction

## 1

As I was looking at the artworks of the old masters in a museum, noticing the cracks on the surface, I started to wonder – for how much longer will the next generations be able to admire these prime artifacts of our culture? The cracks are undeniably the most prominent indication of the artwork’s aging process. I asked myself, could this process be the „death” of the work, or is it just a sign of its entering into the new stage of its existence? How reminiscent it still is of its original form and how much was it altered by the numerous attempts at its preservation?

The process of destruction of an artwork usually begins with a single crack, a solitary scratch which extends with time, expands across the entire surface of the canvas, and, through the years, covers the painting with a network of cracks, known in French as *craquelures*. This distinctive webbing of crevices and scratches stretching across a painted piece usually foretells its physical peril. The cracks will let in dust, moisture and other impurities, the paint will start to dry losing its original elasticity. It will start to flake off. The deterioration will progress smoothly, just like we measure the passage of time – evenly and uniformly.

There is a vast array of numerous crack patterns in the old artworks, carefully examined and described by many painting conservators. The morphology of the crack patterns is strictly connected with mechanical properties of the painting paraphernalia – the support medium and the chosen coating of such – the base, the method of paint mixing, the quality of the ingredients and the environmental factors during the time the work was displayed. Specific physio-chemical properties of coatings, paints and varnishes have a great influence on the later condition of the painted surface, however – we need to remember that paintings are also prone to physical damage. Every day, our closest star emits UV radiation. The majority of known pigments and colouring agents tend to succumb to photodegradation, and, when exposed to direct sunlight, they fade and the colour becomes muted. Changes in humidity and the temperature in spaces we store the paintings in continually destabilise the support medium causing it to contract and expand. In addition, there are tremors and vibrations caused by transportation, possible biological factors (insects, fungi) or

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impurities present in the atmosphere. All of these environmental factors accelerate the decay of the “physicality” of the painting, creating the distinct network, which greatly impacts the aesthetic of the paint layer and, consequently, the perception of the artwork. From the strictly aesthetic point of view, the craquelure is highly undesirable, even though it may be perceived as visually attractive. The distinctive patterned overlay creates an interesting visual effect, it contrasts with the smooth surface of the paint. The network of cracks gives off the impression of authenticity: any damage to the surface of the painting is connected to the passage of time, so the craquelure increases the market value of the artwork. In the artwork conservation field the craquelure is considered to be similar to the friction ridges on human fingers. They carry valuable information on the authenticity of the piece, on the painting methods used by the artist and on the previous conservation and restoration efforts.

The study of the cracks, depending on the environmental factors or the method used, can help identify the school or the workshop the artwork was created in, as well as how to approach its restoration.

Looking at a hundreds-of-years-old painting I wonder - where is the line between the original, the true testimony to the epoch, a gesture of the creator, and the conservator’s intervention and all the attempts at stopping the destructive force of time itself? For how much longer will the painting be able to survive? *Can you destroy the painting on purpose, what are the consequences, and will the idea behind the work survive its physical demise?* At that memorable moment at the museum, where I witnessed the unforgiving influence the passage



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II

*Haarlem As Seen From the  
Dunes in the Northwest*  
**Jacob van Ruisdael**  
1670 - Detail



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III

*Venus*  
**Sandro Boticelli**  
1490 - Detail

of time has on the paintings, which we struggle to protect and “immortalize”, an idea for my painting series was born, motivated by the wish to capture what is usually unnoticed and unwanted. I decided to use this seemingly faulty feature, a defect, to capture this silent sign of time and draw out its emotional force, so that I, myself, can come to terms with the fact that the evidence of my own artistic endeavours will one day perish, second by second.







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# Crisis

## 2

In 2017 the international organization OXFAM, in their annual report, stated that the combined net worth of the 8 wealthiest people in the world is a sum of what the more impoverished half of humanity has.<sup>1</sup> In their 2014 report *Working for the Few*<sup>2</sup> it was 85 people. In January 2022 the same organisation stated that 10 of the wealthiest people in the world doubled their fortunes during the coronavirus pandemic, while 99% of humanity experienced a decrease in income, and 160 millions of people fell into poverty. For half of humanity the world has not become a better place, quite the opposite. Increasing levels of societal inequalities coincide with an increasing lack of trust towards governments and democratic stands. Billions of people across the globe are faced with the uncertainty of tomorrow and are questioning the system which fails to provide them with social justice, and merely increases the inequalities. “Global capitalism meets what, in technical language is called “excessive accumulation”: a situation where the economy has generated great wealth, but the market is unable to absorb it because of growing inequalities”.<sup>3</sup> Extreme concentration of assets and riches of our planet is held by several dozen people. The progressing destitution and denying material goods to the majority of the world, and, what is worse, depriving them of the possibility to advance in societal hierarchy as well as, in consequence preventing them from the consumption of those goods, means that *the transnational capitalist class* (TCC)<sup>4</sup> is finding it harder to find the target market to which it could sell the enormous surplus which it has accumulated. The crisis of the economic model designed for unlimited increase in profits and exploiting nature aligns with the crisis of values, trust for the state and democracy and the crisis in art.

We can observe a similar situation in art, which we may call “excessive accumulation” as well, that is to say, a situation where

1 *World's eight richest people have same wealth as poorest 50%*, [w:] The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jan/16/worlds-eight-richest-people-have-same-wealth-as-poorest-50> [access: 28.04.2022].

2 *Working for the few*, [w:] OXFAM, <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/working-for-the-few-publication/> [access: 28.04.2022].

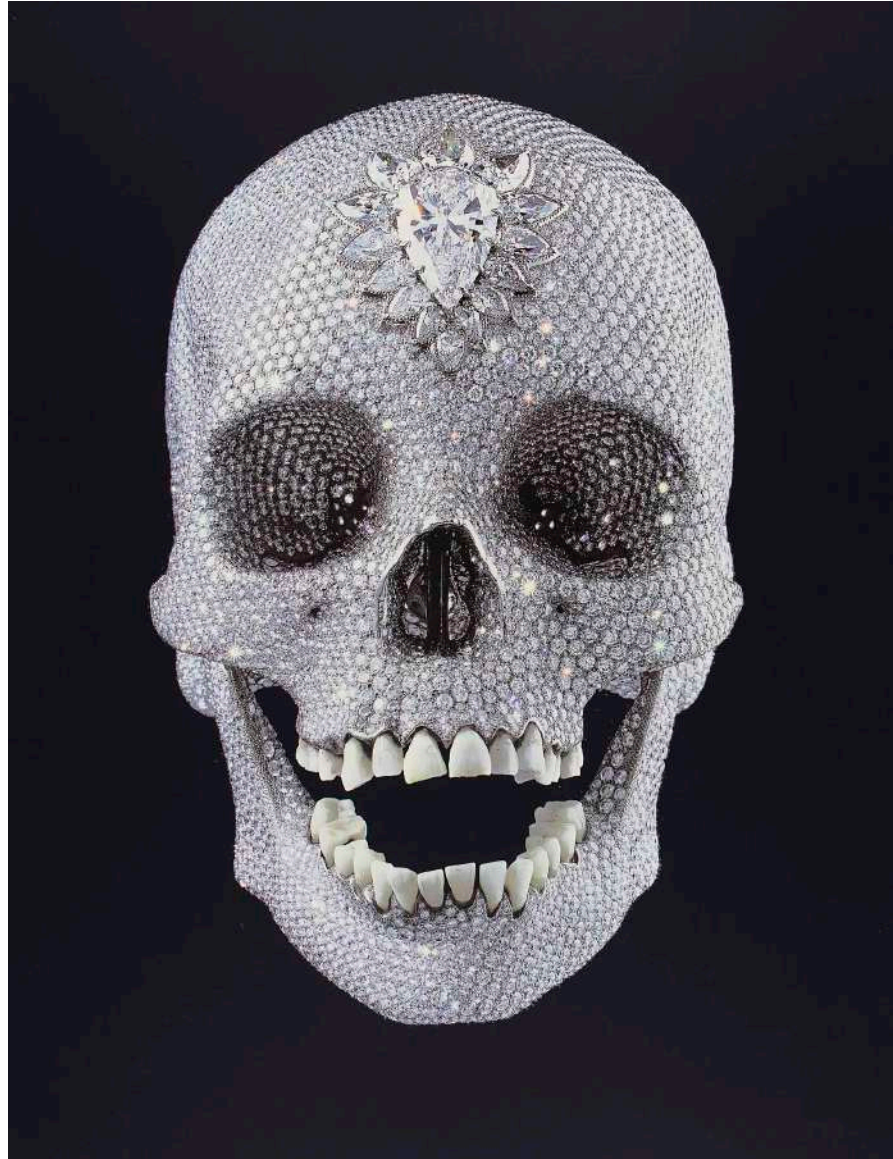
3 W. I. Robinson, *Global Capitalism Has Become Dependent on War-Making to Sustain Itself*, [w:] Truthout, <https://truthout.org/articles/global-capitalism-has-become-dependent-on-war-making-to-sustain-itself/> [access: 28.04.2022].

4 *Ibidem*

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#### IV

*Merde d'Artiste*  
**Piero Manzoni**  
1961



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**V**

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*For the Love of God*  
**Damien Hirst**  
2007

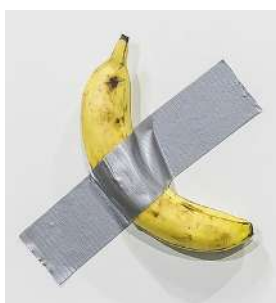
we deal with an overproduction of artwork, which is impossible to be absorbed by international galleries and collectors, for which purchasing art is an investment, as well as individual clients who make decision on which artwork to buy based on the colour of their living room wallpaper. In addition, there is the issue with the lack of distinctive criteria for art assessment, which makes it unclear which works of art available on the market are valuable, and which are worthless. Any activity in art which appears in the postmodern era, so well defined in the Fluxus collective manifesto, according to which everyone is an artist and everything is a work of art, leads to a situation where artwork is no different from a mass produced item and is abiding by the same law. Aside from educated artists, post-art started to be created by masses of ordinary people. Internet forums are chock-full of amateur artists making “artistic objects”, hundreds of You Tube videos teach us how to make those objects, the internet has democratised the prestige of art creation.



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**VI**

*Campbell's Soup Can*  
(Tomato)  
**Andy Warhol**  
1962



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**VII**

*Duct-taped Banana*  
**Maurizio Cattelan**  
2019



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**VIII**

*Everyone I Have Ever Slept*  
*With 1963-1995*  
**Tracey Emin**  
1995

At this point we could talk about “the final triumph of democracy over the last aristocratic hamlet, which used to be art defined by talent, craftsmanship, an outstanding vision and an aesthetic experience”.<sup>5</sup> Instead, not only do we receive a plethora of ideas, messages and artistic stands, but also an overwhelming suspicion that the majority of content we consume is flimsy, superficial and worthless. Original artists and grand art became obsolete, their place taken by masses of post-artists, after all, everyone is a post-artist, whether they are aware of it or not; just wanting to be one is enough. Sławomir Marzec writes “Creativity (...) is made redundant in an unpredictable and adventurous world, how is one supposed to tell lifelong practice from creation, and freedom from necessity? This problem results in crossing the status quo of an artist and post-artists often define themselves as cultural activists etc., seeing it as fulfilling a dream of destroying the barrier between life and art. Certainly, one could destroy those barriers, but it comes at a cost of disappearance of art and its simulation”.<sup>6</sup> During the 41st Painting Biennale Bielska Jesień in 2013 the organisers of one of the most important contemporary Polish painting competitions allowed the participation of painters without an art academy diploma. It is difficult to tell whether this decision was an answer to the “crisis” in painting and the artistic stand of the previous “professional” editions, or it was just supposed to invigorate the scene, however, it posed questions about the purpose of higher artistic education and the purpose of painting as a kind of art of pursuing perfection. As Donald Kuspit writes: “In the past, artists had the task of making good art; nowadays their task is to avoid creating anything. In the past the audience and the critics had to be known. Today they are powerful, and the artists are full of doubts. The history of art and aesthetics can be found exclusively on bookshop shelves. To its many values we ought to add the blurred lines separating the arts from each other and separating them from life. Therefore it becomes clear that old questions about definitions and standards of quality are not only futile, but also naive”.<sup>7</sup> Back when I was still a UMCS Art Department student, during one of our critiques Mikołaj Smoczyński told me that it was possible to make good art in a barn in Syberia and an art academy diploma would not be required to do that. Today, being a teacher myself, I understand those words perfectly. Nevertheless, in the past years, we can observe a tendency to hand over the power in arts from the hands of artists to the hands of curators. There would not be anything inherently wrong with this, after all, there is a need for connections between the artists, the critics and the curators, but the curator

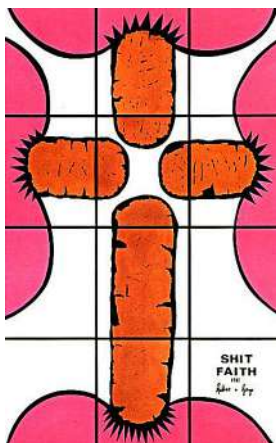
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5 P. Huelle, wstęp do D. Kuspit, *Koniec sztuki*, Gdańsk 2006, Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku, s. IV.

6 S. Marzec, *Sztuka czyli wszystko. Krajobraz po postmodernizmie*, Lublin 2008, Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL & Lubelskie Towarzystwo Zachęty Sztuk Pięknych, s. 138.

7 D. Kuspit, *Koniec sztuki*, Gdańsk 2006, Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku, s. 66.





IX

*Shit Faith*  
**Gilbert & George**  
 1982



X

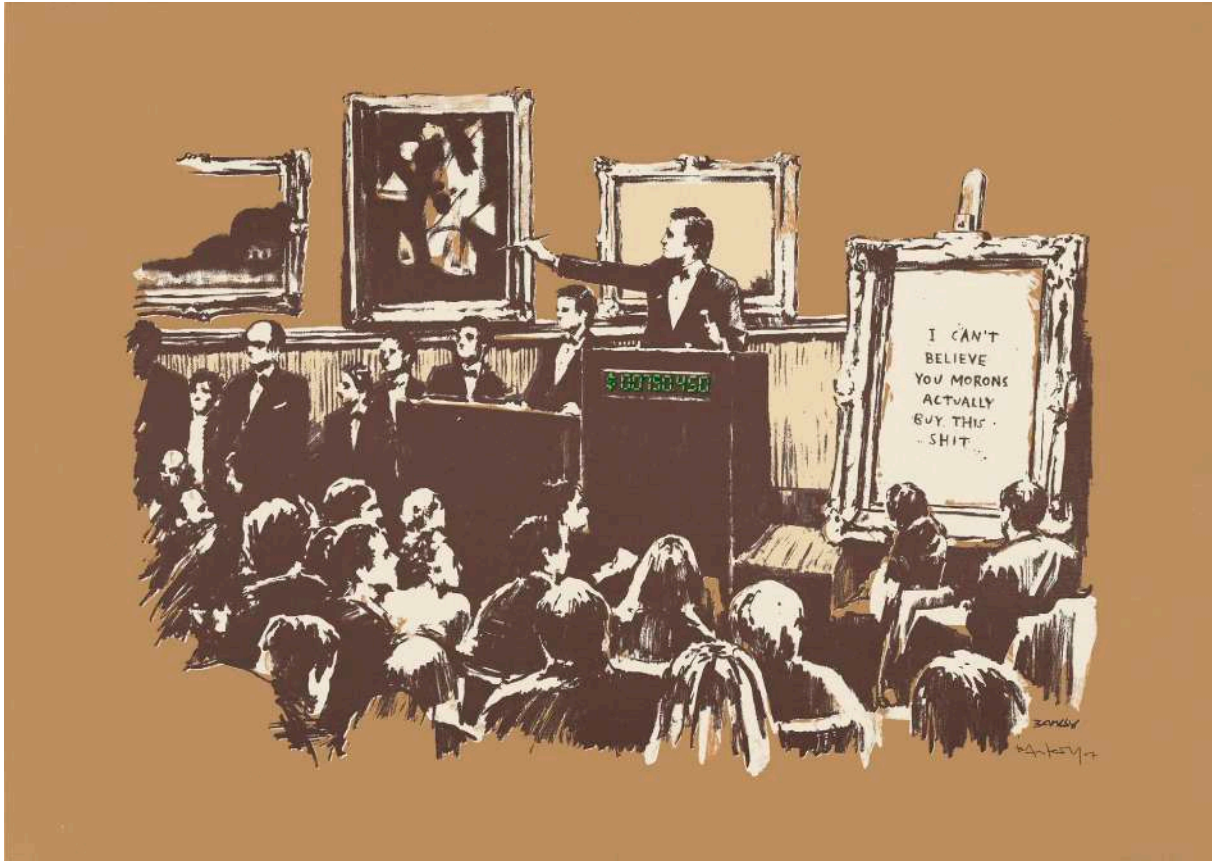
*Girl With Balloon*  
**Banksy**  
 2018

power is too often paired with big business (TTC), the world of international finance and capital investment in artwork. The line between the actual value of an art piece, and the marketing and speculations is becoming blurred. How characteristic of Kuspit is to state that “You can sell anything as a work of post-art – the cheaper and more shitty, the better – it just has to be signed by the right post-artist. Everything lies within the magic of the name, or rather in the magic created by the marketing of that name”.<sup>8</sup> Monika Małkowska came to a similar conclusion in a controversial article, which was published in *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper in 2015. The author puts forward a thesis that the contemporary Polish art turned into a network of interests of Polish curators and she wrote “For something that is not art to become such you just need to ask a curator, so they can anoint it with exegesis. A thoroughly analysed pile of mud will turn out to be full of sophisticated meaning”.<sup>9</sup> Since the 1989 political transformation the Polish art market has become landscaped by the state institutions and people who took their positions as a result of ministerial competition. Private galleries play a proportionately smaller role, and there is a frighteningly big shortage of them compared to the western Europe and the USA, so it is hard to talk about a free market in the Polish art (if we can talk about any kind of freedom in the art market at all). The connections of artists and curators with business is also a cause for concern, because an artist, as a rule, should not side with any party involved in a conflict. What links the experiences of Kuspit and Małkowska is the statement that an unregulated art market is easier for a potential investor than a regulated stock market, because there is more space for activity that walks the thin line of law and ethics.

An interesting commentary to this issue is the artistic path of Banksy. In 2018 in Sotheby, *Girl with Balloon*, an artwork created by the street art icon was destroyed a few seconds after it was auctioned off for 1.4 million dollars, and the event caused a storm in the world of art. The author of the provocation was Banksy himself, who installed a shredder in the frame of the picture, which was turned on remotely at the moment the last hit of the gavel resounded in the room. The artist, who has expressed his distaste for the artistic establishment many times prior and often chose anticapitalistic and anti-war themes for his artwork, decided to do this as a statement of his opinion on the growing interest with his works. Since 2006 his works have been becoming more valuable. Houses on which he painted his graffiti are much more expensive than the neighbouring properties. Sometimes his works are pried off the walls only to appear on auctions later. Barely a year after the

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 85.

<sup>9</sup> M. Małkowska, *Mafia bardzo kulturalna*, „PlusMinus. Rzeczpospolita wydanie weekendowe” nr 7 (10036), <https://www.rp.pl/1500plusminus/art19226031-mafia-bardzo-kulturalna> [access: 28.04.2022].



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**XI**

*Morons*  
**Banksy**  
2007

destruction of *Girl with Balloon* another work of Banksy's, *Devolved Parliament*, was sold at the same auction house for a record sum of 9.9 million pounds. The artist who challenged the current laws of the art market became its hostage. He was "devoured" by the art world, which he so cynically fought. On the 4th of March 2021 a group of collectors and investors, with Banksy's knowledge, burned and transformed his original work worth around 70 000 pounds, *Morons*, into a representation called NFT (*non-fungible token*).<sup>10</sup> Before the destruction, Pest Control, an organisation founded by Banksy to verify his artworks, has confirmed the *Morons* authenticity. The event was in a way a groundbreaking one, for the first time ever, a material, meaningful piece of art was turned into a digital token. The budding NFT artists and collectors' movement is trying to convince us that the non-fungible tokens are the future of the art industry. There would not be anything surprising about it if not for the fact that the digitalized artwork ridicules the collectors for buying expensive art pieces. The idea of an artistic work, which can live for all eternity in the digital form is controversial and I am very careful when it comes to judging this event, however, what is worth noticing is the notion of a painting's existence only in the form of data. We will probably never know if the event described above is another provocation of Banksy's, his

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10 A. Hamacher, An Original Banksy Has Been Burned and Turned Into an NFT, [w:] Decrypt, <https://decrypt.co/60070/an-original-banksy-has-been-burned-and-turned-into-an-nft> [access: 28.04.2022].



## XII

*Ecce Homo/ Behold the Man*  
from left

**Elias Garcia Martinez**  
study on canvas  
1894

**Elias Garcia Martinez**  
fresco at the Shrine of the  
Misericordia de Borja  
1930

**Cecilia Gimenez**  
fresco at the Shrine of the  
Misericordia de Borja  
2012

*In 2012, 80-year-old Cecilia Gimenez, an amateur painter, undertook the conservation of a damaged fresco by Elias Garcia Martinez at the Misericordia Shrine in the town of Borja. Despite the ineptitude and initial criticism, the „restored“ fresco has become an internet phenomenon and tourist attraction. It was decided to leave the painting in its current form.*

answer to Sotheby’s auctions or, as Ben Lewis<sup>11</sup> says, a speculation on a bigger scale, where a few of crypto millionaires are trying to create a new art market. Maybe it is a bit of everything, after all, “a work of art, which has to wait for next generations to judge its worth, is worthless in the eyes of economy”.<sup>12</sup>

My pessimistic assessment of the global capitalism and the art industry coincides with a similarly pessimistic observations on the modern world, on the mechanics and the way in which it functions in the fields of economy or ecology. A few years ago I stumbled upon a book by Marcin Popkiewicz, *World at the crossroads*, which undeniably raised my awareness of the topic of the issues of today’s world, from explaining the cause and effect of the exponential economic growth, through global warming and planet pollution, overpopulation, species extinction, to diminishing resources. Since the dawn of the era of civilisation, everything around grows exponentially – the population, money, global GDP, energy consumption, extraction of raw materials, sustenance production and a vast array of other factors which are the apple of the eye of the politicians and economists, for whom the economic growth is the most important measure of wellbeing and progress. Among the most detrimental factors which promote economic growth Popkiewicz lists “population growth and its age structure, which favours high productivity; the discovery and development of new lands and resources, increase in energy consumption which allows for the increase of production, specialisation of the workforce and introduction of new technologies leading to the introduction of new products and their brisk replacement”.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, along with economic growth comes the increase in waste production, increased consumption of fossil fuels, shortage of land not used by people, and rapid species extinction. “Excessive

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> D. Kuspit, *Koniec sztuki...*, op. cit., s. 89.

<sup>13</sup> M. Popkiewicz, *Świat na rozdrożu*, 2014, Sonia Draga, [PDF], s. 89.



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accumulation”, I wrote about above, may also be applied to the noticeable enormous escalation of problematic issues enumerated by Popkiewicz. An interesting example is the world population growth: “we reached the first billion in 1800, the second one 130 years later, the third 30 years later, the fourth 15 years after that, the fifth, the sixth, the seventh took 12 years each to reach. We can say that the exponential growth has curbed and currently we deal with a classic linear growth – but what a linear growth it is! Although the birth rate in the industrialised countries has dropped, there are 80 millions of people being born every year anyway”.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, some critics point out that the Earth still has space for many more, after all, there is plenty of uninhabited land with low population density, and in certain countries like Poland the number of people is actually plummeting. However, the question is where and what will they charge their phones with? What will they fill their cars with? And the most important one – what will they eat? The truth about how strongly can two seemingly loosely related matters influence each other has opened my eyes in terms of my own creations. People have a natural tendency to imagine that the future will be a continuation of what happened in the past, while at the same time being in denial about the most probable outcomes. We failed to notice that Homo Creator has given up its place to a new human species – Homo Destructor. The human has become the most prominent destroyer of the world we live in, despite all the technological progress leading the humanity into the “brave new world”. The more expansive the human is, the more truth there is to the statement that people will always choose their own short lived wellness over the wellness of Earth, of humanity, and of civilisation. Not even a hundred years have passed since Ortega y Gasset uttered his words: “today the human, deep inside their soul, is terrified of their lack of limits [...] they do not know who they are anymore – because by arriving at a conclusion that it can be anything it can think of it stops knowing what it really is”.<sup>15</sup> Just as Popkiewicz writes: “The path we are going down today may end in a global economic crash, a financial crisis, riots, the fall of countries and the societal order they guarantee”.<sup>16</sup> We could refer here to the words of Donald Kuspit “This is the great lesson of the 21st century: the reality is way more insane than any artistic fiction could ever be”.<sup>17</sup>

I do identify with words of Thomas Piketty “I belong to the generation, which took the fall of communism as a return to freedom. There is not a drop of soviet dictatorship nostalgia in me. I am disgusted by the anticapitalistic rants as well, so full of stereotypes and laziness, not containing even a slither of an idea

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, s. 94.

<sup>15</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset, *Bunt mas i inne pisma socjologiczne*, Warszawa 1982, s. 311-312.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, s. 640.

<sup>17</sup> D. Kuspit, *Koniec Sztuki...*, *op. cit.*, s. 139.

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### XIII

*Fragment of the Berlin Wall  
at Potsdamer Platz*



for the future. I do not want to partake in a constant stigmatization of inequalities – they do not really seem problematic to me as they are, as long as they are justified by being beneficial to the general public”.<sup>18</sup> The awareness of the social, economic or political situation does influence my actions. “The smile of Mona Lisa does not bode well for the future of art. It marks the beginning of the end of art. Art has been unnoticeably poisoned after society had claimed it by emphasising its commercial value and treating it like “high-end” entertainment, which turned it into a societal property. Assimilated by what’s vulgar it lost its uniqueness”.<sup>19</sup> What we are left with is merely a beautiful notion – a word, which has long been stripped of anything that is beautiful: “Art has never been, and especially now is not a royal treaty of humanity’s release from its plagues and hallucinations. Art can give an artist a feeling of self-preservation as their own existential project. It is however unable to resist the cultural and civilisational shock which the entire humanity is in right now”.<sup>20</sup>

Every day the world is moving closer toward its doom, the destruction is its messenger, my artwork tells the story of the time I happened to live in. Similarly to Morawski I think that “there is no art crisis, what we can observe is the art of a total crisis of values. The world can be saved, but we need an alarm

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18 M. Nowicki, *Kapitał XXI wieku*” Thomasa Piketty’ego. Najważniejsza książka dekady w *Newsweeku*, [w:] *Newsweek*, <https://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/kapital-xxi-wieku-thomasa-pikettyego-wywiad-w-newsweeku/12zrw5y> [access: 28.04.2022].

19 D. Kuspit, *Koniec Sztuki...*, *op. cit.*, s. 8.

20 S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie: od sztuki do po-sztuki*, Kraków 1985, Wydawnictwo Literackie, s. 225.

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from the artists and most importantly their resistance”.<sup>21</sup> Today, our choice and freedom are merely a delusion, we are a part of a system, which does not care about the individual, it can only see a grey mass which it can manipulate using money. Contrary to what I have written so far I do not see myself as a catastrophist, but a realist. Art is an expression of its time, and I, being honest with myself, cannot stay indifferent towards the issues discussed above. They incite my disapproval and defiance, my wrath and my disenchantment, and the only way I can express those feelings is through destruction. Similarly, to describe the state of the world we can use words: scratched, battered, cracks, crevices, tears, frays, abrasions, which express the inner rupture, degradation, disintegration, aggression, decay. Our culture is suffering a crisis and this is what *Broken Images* painting series is about. In my art destruction is impartial to the act of creation, a closed circle of life and death, chaos and cosmos. The perfect, idyllic world lives only in the stories we imagine and the time has come to redefine the ideal of a wonderful life.

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#### XIV

*Mona Lisa*  
**Leonardo da Vinci**  
1503-1507 - Detail



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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, s. 298.







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# The idea of beauty

## 3

Known civilisations are characterised by their cultural heritage, which places them in a hierarchy of spiritual and material achievements. Among the specific fields which influence a sense of identity and regulate the role played in a process of change the most is art, a collection of creations – pieces, understood as a purposeful and creative activity, which for thousands of years has been associated with the idea of beauty. Beauty itself as an aesthetic category has already been functioning in the ancient times, however, the capacity of its meaning had been much more general than it later was. In the ancient era it was mostly connected with the good, the morality, the mind, perfection, proportionality, harmony. Beauty in itself was not applied to the works of art. As it was a quality reserved for a properly formed mind. In medieval times there was a strong emphasis on the moral beauty, and the Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed to moderation as the most important feature of beauty.<sup>22</sup> In the philosophical notion of objectivism or realism beauty is perceived as an objective feature, unrelated to personal preferences of an individual, a thought which subjectivists reject, convinced that the perception of beauty depends solely on their idea of it. The perception of beauty as a property of an object proposed numerous concepts which were meant to explain and define it, though there is still no agreement on which one of them is the ultimate one. In a concept based on the classical approach beauty is a property of a structure, in which it is achieved when the harmony of an element corresponds to the harmony of the entity, however, this idea seems to have been configured as an open question with no certain answer.<sup>23</sup>

Pondering the idea of beauty, it is necessary to recall the philosophical notion of an “ideal” as an immaterial, mental, perfect template and an individual being. Therefore, speaking of an ideal of beauty it is mostly about imagining something perfect, extraordinarily pleasant for the senses, giving off a feeling of harmony, soothing for the mind and the soul, tugging on the most tender of the heartstrings – something which eludes all description. Morawski writes that „the artistic utopia is usually a dream of a different world, a better one

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### XV

*Painting of a Buffalo in a Cave in Altamira (Spain)*  
17000-12000 B.C.E.

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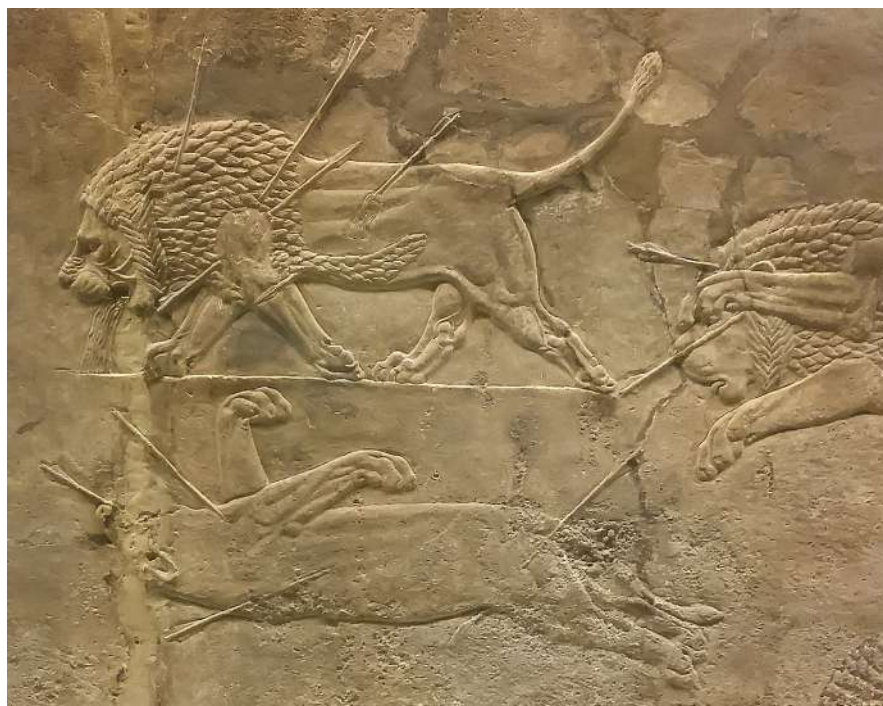
22 K. Broszkowski, *Cnota umiarkowania, czystości i powściągliwości według sumy teologicznej św. Tomasza z Akwinu*, [w:] Tau, [http://tau.broszkowscy.com/tom\\_temperantia1.html](http://tau.broszkowscy.com/tom_temperantia1.html) [access: 28.04.2022].

23 E. Prettejohn, *Beauty & Art*, Wielka Brytania 2005, Oxford University Press, s. 11.

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**XVI**

*Lion Hunt of Ashurbanipal*  
645–635 B.C.E.



than the one we were given, but the silhouette of such future is not very distinctive”<sup>24</sup> and that „without the transcendence the human is stripped of the mystery of its existence, stripped of the antinomy of what is given to the senses, imagination and the mind, and of what eludes those powers of mind and this is why it enriches the existence”.<sup>25</sup> Experiencing beauty through the human subject is such a complex matter, that it has become a centre point for aesthetic forethought, asking questions like what do we think about when we call something “beautiful”? Or what are the specific properties of the historical artifacts which are appreciated because of their aesthetics?<sup>26</sup> None of the Phidias’ works survived till the modern era, the testimonies of their beauty and craftsmanship are known only from the literary descriptions left behind by their witnesses, and yet, in the collective conscience the statues of Athena Parthenos or the Olympian Zeus are the embodiment of artistic perfection.

The Ancient Greek, undoubtedly, have laid the foundations for the classic understanding of the category of beauty: the Pythagoreans thought that beauty manifests through a perfect structure as an effect of proportions and the harmony of its element; for Aristotle everything “which by being good is pleasurable”<sup>27</sup> is considered beautiful, as well as what is “pleasing to the sight and hearing”<sup>28</sup>; according to Plato art should depict the idea of things, yet, in the pictures Plotinus saw a direct depiction of true existence: “pliant is any depiction which can, like a mirror, capture any idea”.<sup>29</sup> Beauty, along with truth and good

24 S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie...*, *op. cit.*, s. 158.

25 *Ibidem*, s. 388.

26 E. Prettejohn, *Beauty & Art...*, *op. cit.*, s. 9.

27 Arystoteles, *Rhet*, 1366, a 33.

28 Arystoteles, *Topica*, 146, a 2.

29 Plotyn, *Enneady t. 2*, Warszawa 1959, s.32, cyt. za: Ewa Borowiecka, *Poznawcza*

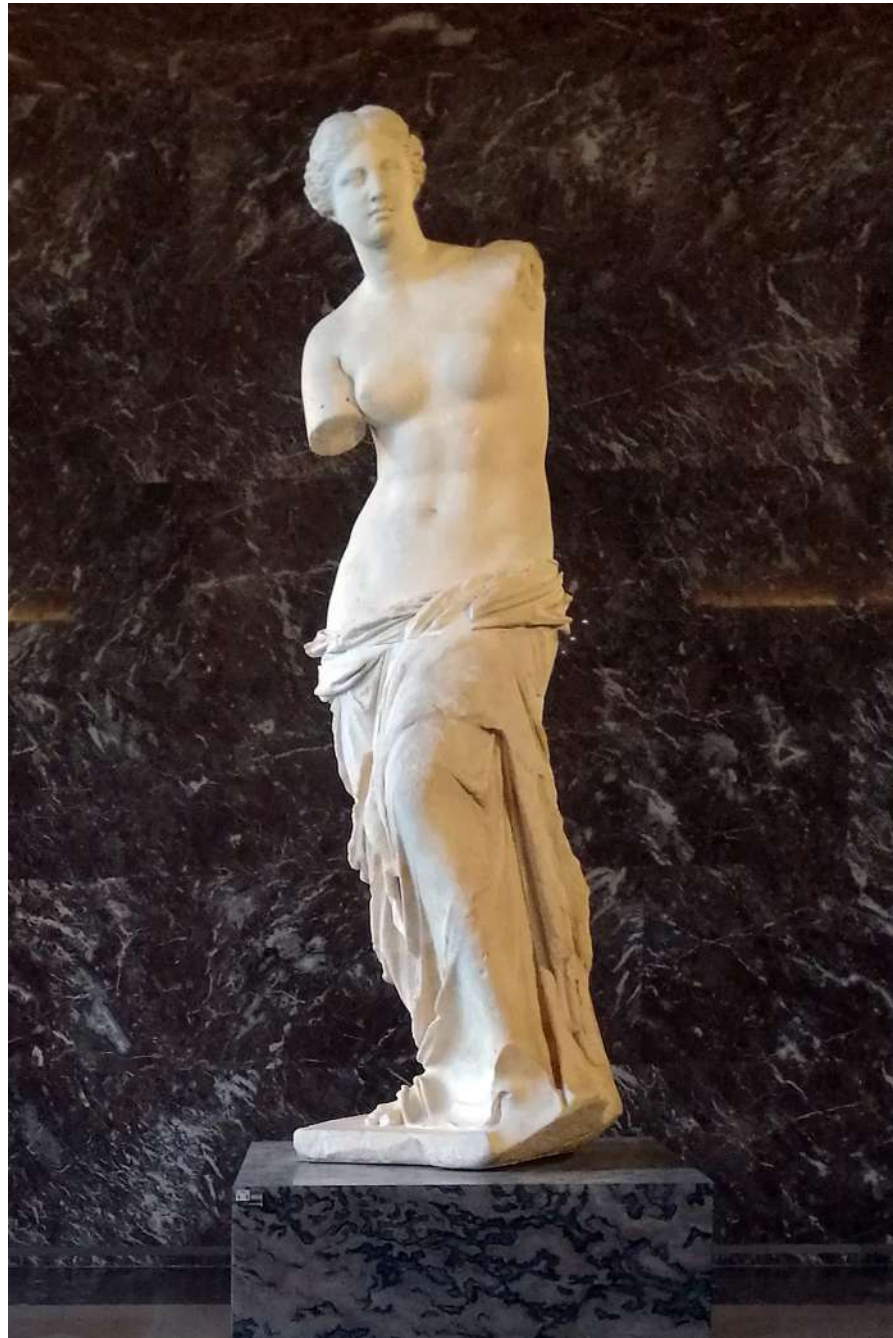


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constitute a transcendental triad, which was consequently absorbed by the institutionalised world of Christianity. In the ancient history true freedom was considered to lie in acquisition of knowledge and it was first and foremost education and the improvement of an individual that was emphasised – development of the mind, the spirit and the physical body was prioritised and figurative fine arts were secondary to that. Wall art's role was usually decorative, educational, sometimes religious, magical, it was the evidence for the status of the place or a person. Then, after the fall of the West Roman Empire, the mimicry in the visual arts was smoothly taken over by the medieval craftsmen, who would piously decorate surface

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wartości sztuki, Lublin 1986, Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, s. 22.

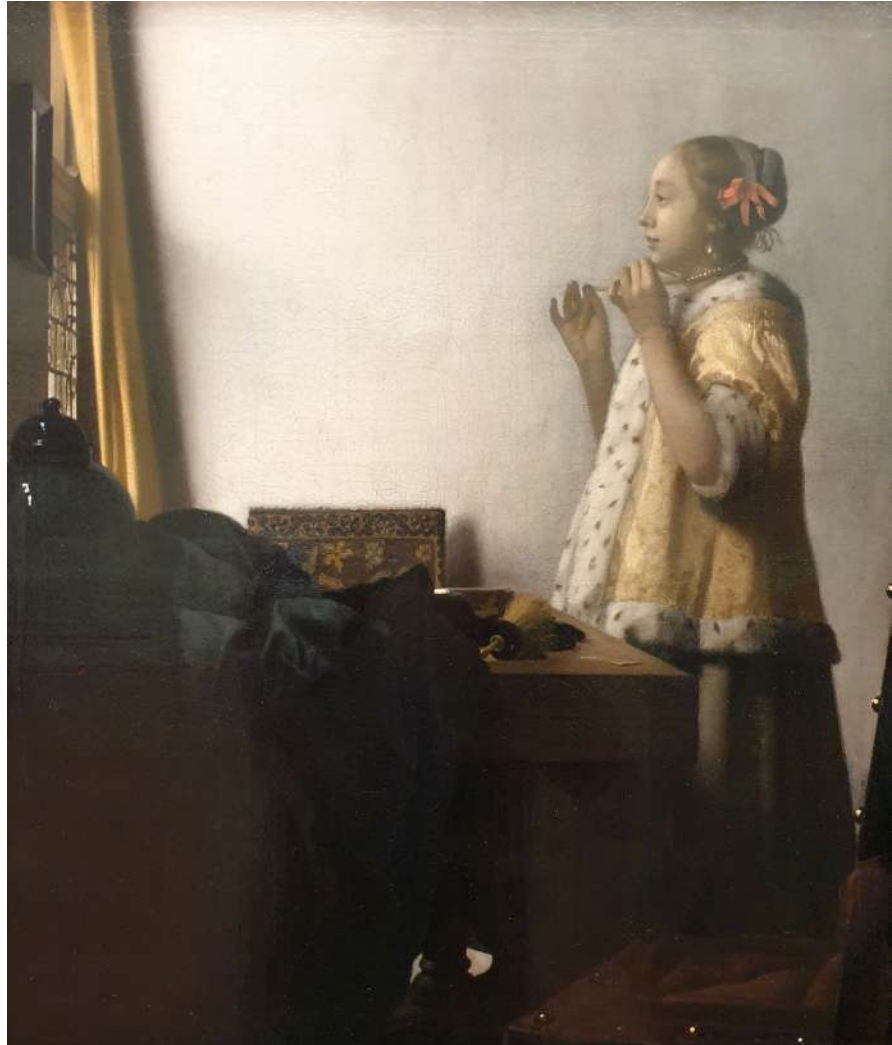


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**XVII**

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*Venus de Milo*  
ca. 130-100 B.C.E



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## XVIII

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*Young Woman  
with a Pearl Necklace*  
**Jan Vermeer van Delft**  
1662/1665

after surface, paying close attention to the religious and social function of those depictions. This conforming to the imperative value resulted from the mentality of that time, drenched with the fear of hell and the eternal suffering, the languor of the sinful life and the piety which brought salvation. The aesthetic value, celebrated by the ancient ones, was now of less importance, secondary, although it was not lost entirely, but it played a supplementary role, not the main one. Anyway, the ancient ones themselves did not see the visual arts as the richest source of aesthetic experience: the wall paintings of Knossos do not abide by the rigid composition laws, but rather they are a linear narration lead in a quite unrestricted manner. It was poetry and theatre where the main source of aesthetic experiences lied for the people of the ancient times.

Considering all of the above we can now be reminded why the renaissance turned out to be an exceptionally ground-breaking era for the artists. Until then they were called craftsmen, they were denied a place among the ennobled who engaged in *artes liberales*. The pivot towards the human being brought about changes in the perception of a social role of artists liberated from the teachings of

the church oriented towards the punishment for a sinful lifestyle. The modern humanism unleashed the ugliness, the monstrosity, and above all, it delivered us from the burden of the content swollen with human sin and corruption. The painters, the sculptors, the architects wished to elevate the prestige of their professions and wished to finally be included in the noble society of scholars, and no longer be considered craftsmen. The humanism allowed the artists to reach for the collections of the ancient masters, their achievements, from their history and culture. Along with the religious themes, mythological themes appeared. The harmony and the symmetry was celebrated, as well as perfect proportions and geometric compositions. Brand new pieces were characterised by their orderliness, their light, their rhythm. The artist, creating a piece, could finally pour a part of their soul into the piece openly and intentionally, and make the piece a true expression of their individuality, making attempts at capturing beauty: “anyone who, working in any field, understands how significant his work is, as well as the new knowledge, for the times they live in is an artist”.<sup>30</sup> One can only speculate that the painters and the sculptors had felt this while they were creating their masterpieces and that is what pushed them towards a more unconstrained manner of expressing themselves and using their talent not only for utility, but mostly for reaching the peak of aesthetic, expressing the value of humanism, or simply of an openness towards another human and letting them inside the tightly shut world of transcendental experiences.



## XIX

*Paradise Flycatcher  
on Pine Tree*  
**Gao Qifeng**  
1932

The idea of beauty is connected with the notion of the canon in the fine arts. As a rule of depicting a human body it defined the aesthetic idea of any given era and their expression of societal and religious systems.<sup>31</sup> Until the era of renaissance it was usually the canons invented earlier that were used, with slight alterations: in medieval pieces the saints and the nobility are standing up straight or kneeling, with their arms close to the body, or palms held together in a praying gesture, the face often in a half-profile; they remind us of symmetrically situated statues in their eternal stillness. Only the silhouettes of numerous personifications of evil: demons, monsters, hideous creatures out of night terrors assume dynamic poses which are supposed to highlight their satanic nature.

It is often said that the change had occurred in the renaissance, when the human became the main area of focus and the measure of matter. The efforts to prove that the cosmic harmony is hidden in the proportions of a human body reached various results, but they were made as eagerly as those in attempts to grasp perspective or to translate the surrounding world into the mathematical system (e.g.

30 M. McLuhan, *Wybór pism*, Warszawa 1975, Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, s. 76.

31 K. Kubalska-Sulkiewicz, M. Bielska-Łach, A. Manteuffel-Szarota (red.), *Słownik terminologiczny sztuk pięknych*, Warszawa 1996, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN SA, s. 174.





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XX

*Birth of Venus*  
**Alexandre Cabanel**  
1863

the golden ratio). Raffaello Sanzio, known as Raphael, was especially accomplished at this, enriching the visual canon of the modern civilisation: “He was the one who defined gestures, facial expressions, and poses quoted by the next generations and he shaped the way of depicting human relationships, historical scenes and that which is divine”.<sup>32</sup> In his legacy beauty and normality are one entity “the artistic mastery of Raphael is the mastery of realism. His paintings are fully realistic: they present people and objects as he saw them and he knew how to picture them”.<sup>33</sup> At the same time Raphael’s creations are characterised by an uncanny artistic freedom, and he himself was a shape and colour virtuoso, a virtuoso of light and shade. Short, but an intense and prolific life of Raphael was marked with ingenuity very early. Quite quickly he surpassed his alleged masters, Perugino and Pinturicchio (“traditional hypotheses (...) can not explain when, and, whether at all, the young artist of Urbino was a student of one or the other. From what we can deduce today, it seems nearly certain that Raphael was never a student of anyone in the literal meaning of this word”).<sup>34</sup> Each of Raphael’s pieces pictured a new point of view, was a strive for perfection, an improvement of his craftsmanship and skill, and general development was the most prominent constant in his life. Until his death in 1520, the artist would continue his intense efforts in the constant pursuit of classic beauty.

It may seem that that Raphael succeeded in reaching a certain balance between the majestic form that was prevalent and his emancipation from religious formalism.<sup>35</sup> And it often happens to be

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32 Ch. Thoenes, *Rafaël*, Niemcy 2005, TASCHEN GmbH, s. 7.

33 *Ibidem*, s. 9.

34 C. Strinati, *Rafaël*, Kielce 2017, Wydawnictwo JEDNOŚĆ, s. 179.

35 *Ibidem*, s. 187.

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this way, a revolt inspires progress and growth, not only understood as an open act of wrath, but mostly as a need to ask questions, the need for change, growing impatience with the obsolete order of its basic inability to meet basic requirements. In my case, my first ever “period of rebellion” happened during the time I was a student at the Łódź Academy of Fine Arts, an academy rooted strongly in constructivism: the naive search for the formula for a “good painting” lead me to a dead end, and the only way to exit was backtracking. I had to rewind, destroy something, in order to move forward. Back there the word “destruction” did not exist, the opposite of creation was deconstruction understood as subtraction from an entity, never a process by itself. Neither of those two options included actual destruction, which would allow to build something new atop the ruins. In a movie “Fight Club”, after being asked why he mauled the handsome face of his opponent, the main character replied “I wanted to destroy something beautiful”. In this simple statement I find something perverse, a taboo waiting to be broken, but also a signpost showing the way to the truth while the path is being wiped away by the aestheticization of reality and the progressing commercialisation of art. That is how one of the most important aspects of my doctorate thesis was born, in which I wanted to challenge the idea of beauty and to continue examining destruction and its possibilities.







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# Raphael

## 4

At present, over twenty museums in the world are in possession of Raphael's depictions of Madonna in their collections. This motif was an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the artist: „Depictions of Madonna are never the same, there are no repeated poses, no satisfaction with existing solutions – no Madonna is like the other”.<sup>36</sup> Growing demand for images of the Mother of God which were intended to be worshipped at home or given as a gift was enormous and Raphael tried to deliver. One could risk a statement that, in a way, he commercialised his own work. Raphael's Madonnas are icons of western culture. Along with Venetian artists, Raphael is included in the most successful discoverer of femininity in paintings. This topic was not of interest to him per se, it mostly resulted from the exploration of the relationship between a mother and a child, or - more precisely - between a mother and a son. The Madonna was not a biblical theme: in the New Testament she was a servant; it was not until later that theologians had given her role more meaning, and in the middle ages the cult of the Virgin Mother emerged.<sup>37</sup> Next to the piety, which the mother is full of towards her son, there is the presence of the prophecy of the Passion and the motherly pain of child loss, but most importantly, there is the extraordinary, close, intimate parental affection. The type of love the mother has for her child is probably the most mythical of the emotions.

When I was a child I was given an album with Raphael's works reproductions from my mother. Beautifully published, its big, full-page, colourful prints fascinated me, and I used to copy them with excitement. It was then that I had decided to become a painter. I was seduced by the timeless beauty of Raphael's works, which, despite my young age, left me in awe of how one can capture the world. Current realisation is, for me, a return to the source, where I had begun my journey, but, at the same time, a new stage of development. Today, with that album still on my shelf, I am asking myself a question: is the idea of beauty able to win against the passage of time and the ruthlessness of matter? Where should we look for the line separating the divine from what is human? Where is the line of what is considered painting, where are the boundaries of a picture? Have we, in our vanity, insatiation, with no regard for

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XXI

*Large Cowper Madonna*  
**Raffaello Sanzio**  
1508

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<sup>36</sup> Ch. Thoenes, *Rafaël...*, *op. cit.*, s. 29.

<sup>37</sup> *Loc. cit.*



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**XXII**

*Madonna Alba*  
**Raffaello Sanzio**  
1511

what is sacred reached the end of our culture, the end of painting, the end of art?

Raphael's painting ideal is the starting point for my series of paintings. His creations are perceived as a symbol of the sophisticated thought and the endeavours of the western civilisations, especially as an ideal of beauty for the contemporary art: "for the longest time Raphael was perceived by the historians as a painter of perfection, regularity, absolute dominance over composition and expression. To put it simply – the icon of classicism. (...) the concise and comprehensible composition, a feeling of a subtle and deep figurative narration, the nobility and the beauty of the painted characters and architecture (...).<sup>38</sup> No other pieces by any other artist have never been so suitable for my intentions, that is to say, for my attempt to destroy the idea of beauty.

I have nothing but respect for Raphael's achievements, but I do not see him as my master. I believe that the personal relationship I have with his creations is responsible for a certain sensitivity with which I receive his works, but it is only a sentiment, not an artistic stand. The contemporary era has challenged many ideals, and Raphael's beauty is no exception. The artist was believed to have realistic tendencies – paganistic humanism devoted to reality, and

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<sup>38</sup> C. Strinati, *Rafael...*, *op. cit.*, s. 237-239.

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not art.<sup>39</sup> Andre Malraux has put Raphael in a context of ancient art, Bologna school and academism in British art stating that everything above has lost value for the contemporary art.<sup>40</sup> Barnett Newman was convinced that the modernism has led the artists back to its initial rules taught that art is an expression of thought, important truths and not a sentimental and artificial “art”.<sup>41</sup> Some had even said that in the “revolutionary” vocabulary of an artist – “aesthetic”, “contemplation” and “beauty” are ugly words.<sup>42</sup> Morawski wrote that “denying originality to Raphael mostly stems from a strong and understandable aversion towards his imitators, who have disgraced his Madonnas, and from a reaction, an explainable one, to the canonisation of his achievements, which were in their prime in the 19th century”.<sup>43</sup>

Michael Leyton, a Rutgers University Psychology Department professor, who studies shape as a geometric and mathematical property, in his work *The Structure of Paintings* he analyses the composition of a selection of works, for instance, *Madonna Alba* by Raphael. His analysis proves that Raphael had perfected the art of composition. Carefully planned structure of the painting consists of awe inspiring, almost mathematically defined extremities, which mark guidelines that bring the order into the painting. To give at least one example from this extensive analysis the first extremity can be found next to the John The Baptist’s ear, the other, almost symmetrically, just behind the Madonna’s elbow.<sup>44</sup> Out of those two points, one could extend lines which govern the entire composition, creating a shape of a pyramid, three angles, the symbol of the divine number. There are many more mathematical relations in the picture, which generally proves how intentionally and consciously Raphael is able to create his composition: “in Piero della Francesca’s paintings, even chaos is often portrayed – as in *Battles in Basilica de San Francisco in Arezzo* – according to the criteria of orderliness and harmonious planning of the composition, which is never dependant on what it depicts, but it dominates it instead. This type of domination over composition characterizes Raphael as well and definitely has its roots in Piero della Francesca”.<sup>45</sup>

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39 S. Morawski, *Absolut i forma*, Kraków 1966, Wydawnictwo Literackie, s. 130.

40 Ibidem, s. 57.

41 B. Newman, *The sublime is now*, 1948, s. 67, cyt. Za: D. Kuspit, *Koniec sztuki*, Gdańsk 2006, Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku

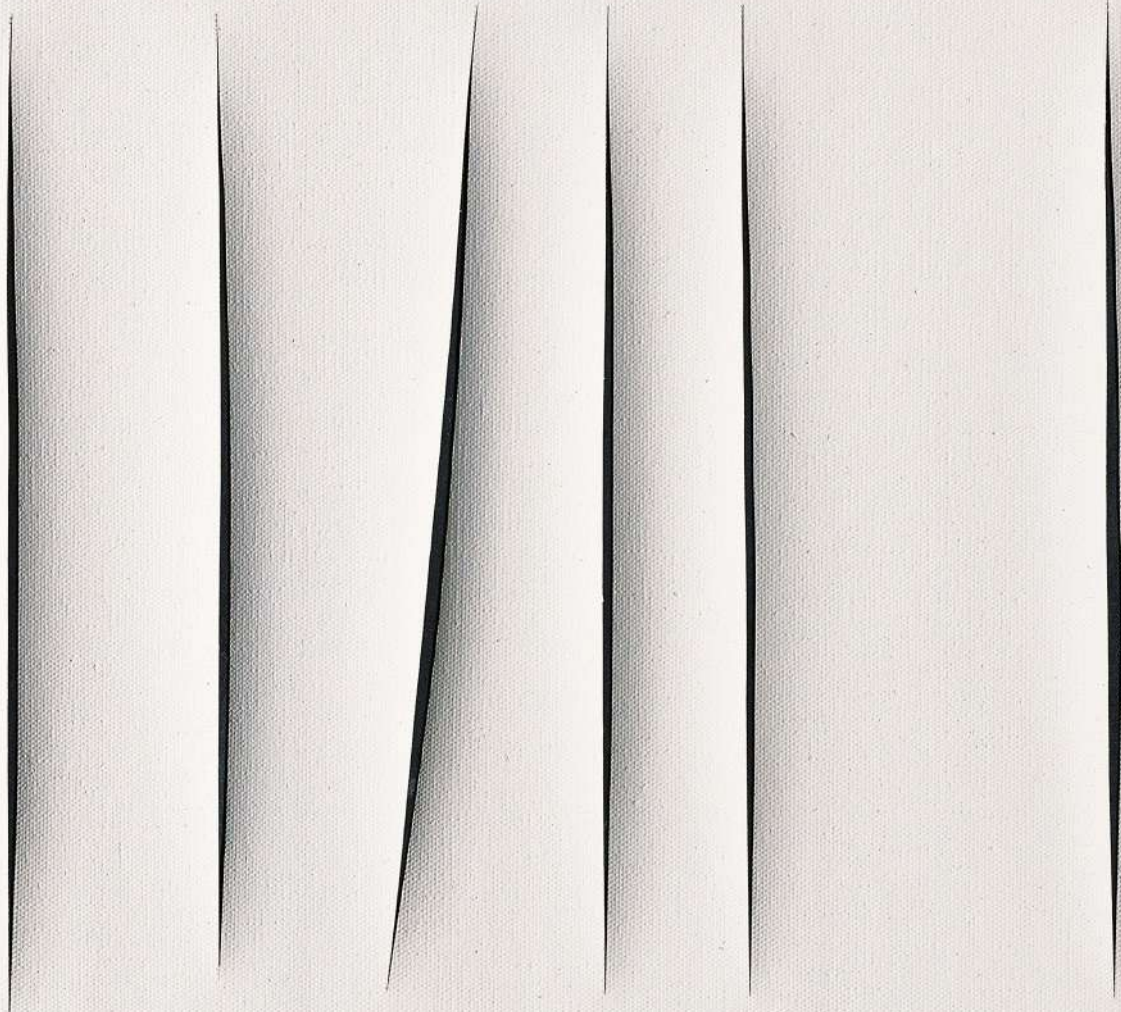
42 D. Kuspit, *Koniec Sztuki...*, *op. cit.*, s. 38.

43 S. Morawski, *Absolut i forma...*, *op. cit.*, s. 130.

44 M. Leyton, *The Structure of Paintings*, Austria 2006, SpringerWienNewYork, s. 29.

45 C. Strinati, *Rafaël...*, *op. cit.*, s. 231.







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# Destruction

## 5

Cases of intentional acts of destruction rarely happen in art, and the history of „the art of destruction” is relatively short. Barely 70 years ago the first attempts to use destruction in art appeared. It may seem that the beginnings of those attempts can be found in traumatic experiences of the World War II and in the landscape it left behind. Cruelty has always been a part of war, nevertheless, the scale of 1939-1945 conflict, the number of casualties, the mass extermination and the awareness of the atrocities which human beings are capable of committing against one another devalued the notion of humanism in art. In addition, the fear of possible nuclear threat and the confrontation of two ideological opponents, which were, in a way, a legacy of this war, all in all scarred our civilisation for the next decades and became a catalyst for the changes in a way of thinking of a modern human being. As Adam Rajewski states in *Living Contemporary Art*: “the human being, not wanting to come to terms with the futility of their suffering tries to give it meaning. The contemporary art, just like the old one, helps them find that meaning. Together with them, not only does it ask questions about the point of fates of individuals, but also about the point of history, the entirety of humanity’s experiences caused by the geographic arrangements, social structures, political circumstances”.<sup>46</sup>

In 1949 Lucio Fontana pierced and made cuts into a blank cardstock attached to the frame like canvas. That piece was the first one in a series which the author named *Concetto spaziale* (*Spacial Concept*), a series which remained with the author until his death in 1968. Later, the artist would divide his series into two categories: *buchi* (*holes*) and *tagli* (*cuts*). The single gesture, the act of destruction, became the focal point of his famous works, which are an amalgamation of sculpture, drawing and painting, creating a unique language at the intersection of multiple areas of art. Paradoxically, until 1949 that Italian-Argentinian artist had never used canvas as a base, he was studying to become a sculptor since his childhood; at the beginning, as his father’s protégé, then at university in Milan. During the war, Fontana lived in Buenos

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### XXIII

*Concetto Spaziale Attese*  
**Lucio Fontana**  
1959

46 A. Radajewski, *Żywa sztuka współczesności*, Wrocław 1982, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, s. 17-18.

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Aires; he returned to Milan in 1947. The city was in the process of recovery after the Allied bombing, which had destroyed the artist's workshop and all of his earlier works. The very same year Fontana announced *Primo manifesto dello Spazialismo (First Spacialist Manifesto)* – a new movement which was supposed to incorporate colour, sound, space, movement and time into the new kind of art. The ideological experiences of spacialism must have had influenced him greatly. In his cuts, Fontana rather seeks to break the mould of the two-dimensionality of paintings than to destroy the surface of the canvas. He distorts the purpose of painting over the flat surface of a piece, and in return he offers something which could be defined as a relation between the inner and outer space, while at the same time no one really knows if he did that in the field of painting, drawing or sculpture. As he would often say: "I escape from the painting and the traditional understanding of art symbolically, but also materially, from the prison that is a flat surface".<sup>47</sup> Sharp, almost surgical cuts, very carefully scattered all over the picture become a deep metaphor which suggests a metaphysical spaciality, engaging the surrounding space. Nevertheless, there is an element of destruction in Fontana's works, it manifests as a profound need for change in the post-war art, just like the artist had said: "I make a hole in canvas, so as to leave behind the old pictorial formula".<sup>48</sup> Lucio Fontana's actions were directed specifically at the entry into space, the abolishment of the two-dimensional dictatorship of a flat surface, and the destructive character of his works was more resultant. At the same time Fontana invalidated the critique of the contemporary art, which stated that "a painting is impossible, because it is internally contradictory, putting (...) anything onto canvas is an act of opposition against its flatness. Every element different from the surface of the painting creates planes, and consequentially, the space, which creates a discord between spatiality and flatness."<sup>49</sup>

Robert Rauschenberg, who wanted to use the process of destruction in a more aware and controlled manner, took a different and a brand new approach. At the beginning of his career, Rauschenberg had decided to check if boundaries of what is considered art exist. The process of destruction was in his area of interest. He began to wonder if it was possible to create a work of art through physical erasure. He began timidly, by wiping one of his works with an eraser, however, he concluded that an act of destruction of an unknown piece by an unknown artist did not

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47 M. Osberg, *Over 40 Years since His Death, a Look at Lucio Fontana's Prolific Destruction*, [w:] Artsy, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-over-40-years-since-his-death-a-look-at-lucio-fontana-s-prolific-destruction> [access: 28.04.2022].

48 Ibidem.

49 P. Taranczewski, *O płaszczyźnie obrazu*, Wrocław 1992, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, s. 11.



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**XXIV**

*Erased de Kooning Drawing*  
**Robert Rauschenberg**  
1953



work. The only solution was to destroy a well-known piece of art created by a very famous artist. He went to the New York workshop of Willem de Kooning and apprehensively introduced him to the idea. De Kooning, despite his initial reservations, agreed that he would allow for one of his works to be taken by a young stranger in order for him to destroy it. Rauschenberg had chosen a piece with traces of ink, even paint, because ones made with a pencil seemed too easy to erase. Working on the act of destruction, he eventually managed to wipe every trace of de Kooning's painting. His friend, Jasper Johns, framed the empty canvas and signed it "Erased de Kooning Drawing Robert Rauschenberg 1953". That realisation became a one time study in the extensive portfolio of the American artist. If Rauschenberg had continued erasing works by well-known artists, he would have surely had become a forefather of conceptual art – he created a work of art by destroying a work of art.

A few years later, John Chamberlain begins welding sculptures using sheet metal from dilapidated old cars. His groundbreaking work *Shortstop* was made entirely of „found” materials - fenders

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**XXV**

*Facel Vega*  
**César Baldaccini**  
1962



from an abandoned vintage Ford, which Chamberlain reworked by driving a truck over them. He put the resulting pieces together by trial and error, relying on his own intuition and material suggestions. Since then, the artist has used discarded car bodies, which he crushed and welded together to create vibrant dynamic sculptures in brightly coloured car paints. The spontaneity and intuitive nature of his process meant that his work bore similarities to a trend in painting popular in the United States at the time, Abstract Expressionism, and as Chamberlain knew and was friends with several artists representing this trend and shared their aspirations to create a new American modern art, he also received a similar reception from critics. The artist deliberately went to landfills in search of discarded auto parts that were suitable for his creative productions. Critics were quick to link the origin of Chamberlain's materials and sources of inspiration to the tragedy of their origins. The artist denied these insinuations, but he was certainly aware that the emotional power of his works evoked associations with the aftermath of an accident, the tortured sheet metal, the distortions of a collision. At the same time in France, César Baldaccini was similarly exploiting the possibilities offered by bent sheet metal. Like Chamberlain, he sourced from scrap

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**XXVI**

*Untitled*  
**John Chamberlain**  
1962



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**XXVII**

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*Sacchi*  
**Alberto Burri**  
1955



yards and chose materials that were plentiful, cheap, and easy to work with. In 1958, César observed a car crushing press at a scrap metal yard, and inspired by this discovery, he focused on the targeted compression technique that would become his trademark. Using a hydraulic press, he compressed various objects in the form of parallelepipeds, first in small formats and then whole cars. At the Salon de Mai in 1960, he exhibited *Trois tonnes*, a work consisting of three compressed cars, which caused a scandal. The act of appropriation was intended as a challenge to consumer society, and it quickly made César associated with the New Realist movement. Both Chamberlain and César changed the meaning of „ready-made.” They used the automobile as a medium and as a tool. They fully embodied Kandinsky’s idea that „the artist is not only entitled but obliged to operate with form as he needs it for his purposes.”<sup>50</sup> The destruction and modification that occurred in one process created a new quality, and both built their later work on this experience.

As a student I was fascinated by Informel art. I was very sensitive to the silent speech of matter, but I was more interested in the processes to which it was subjected - the forces of the elements, the destructive effect of time. I was no longer interested in art that resulted only from rational knowledge; the creative process also required the involvement of intuition, gesture and relationship with the material. One of the Informel artists whose achievements

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<sup>50</sup> W. Kandyński, *O duchowości w sztuce*, Łódź 1966, Państwowa Galeria Sztuki w Łodzi, s. 124.



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and creative path had a very strong influence on my work and the creation of this series was Alberto Burri, an artist who, in a rather accidental way, found his life's purpose in art. A doctor by training, he was conscripted into the army immediately after graduation and found himself in Africa in 1943. A few months later he was taken prisoner by the British and sent to a prisoner of war camp in Hereford, Texas. Paradoxically, the stay in the camp in the desert became salutary for Burri. It was there that he became interested in art and began to paint. The first material he used was carded canvas, which he recovered from jute and linen sacks. This material stayed with him for a long time and became one of the hallmarks of his work. To Italy, which was slowly recovering from the defeat of the lost war, Burri returned in 1946. In his painting experiments, he turned to cheap and widely available materials such as wood, clay, straw, sand, burnt plastics, and polyvinyl chloride glue, which became as important a material for him as paint. One of Burri's best-known series of works is *Sacchi* (*Sacks*), which was created in the first half of the 1950s. Abstract compositions made of jute sacks, patched and sewn together and then pasted onto canvas, usually red or black. In the same period there were works in which Burri used fire in the creative process. Also in the 1950s there were several works using the effect of cracked paint, which Burri developed later in life under the name *Cretti*. The name derives from the crackle I described above, whose Italian equivalent is the word *crettare*, which has its origin in the Latin *crepitare* meaning "to crack, crackle". The natural cracks so common in deserts inspired the series. To achieve the effect, Burri applied a mixture of pigment, kaolin, resin and polyvinyl acetate to the picture plane, which cracked as it dried. The thickness

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**XXVIII**

*Legno e bianco I*  
**Alberto Burri**  
1956





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**XXIX**

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*Grande Cretto Nero*  
**Alberto Burri**  
1977

of the layer meant that this plastic mass could dry for up to a week. During this time, in order to control, at least partially, the process of „cracking”, Burri subjected the painting to additional treatments, modelled with putty, incised or intentionally exposed the surface to fire in order to speed up the drying process, and fixed the resulting furrows with glue. The painting process was in his case very free and, like Chamberlain, Burri relied on his own intuition and suggestions of the material. The masterly shaped matter was characterised by a tremendous power of expression. As a lover of Renaissance art, Burri must have been aware that his *Cretti* evoke the idea of the passage of time highlighted by the cracking of materials. The elementary forms and simplicity of the means emphasise the expression and the drama of decay playing out. The Italian artist proved that „it is not possible to exhaust the meanings and values that justify painting, painting can discover ever new groups of them, or embody them on canvas in ever new ways”.<sup>51</sup> The series culminated in 1984 with the launch of a project on the borderline between land art and site-specific art called *Cretto di Gibellina (Gibellina Crack)*, also known as *Il Grande Cretto (The Great Crack)*. On the site of the earthquake-damaged town of Gibellina in Sicily, one of the largest artworks ever made was created. Burri covered most of the town’s ruins, an area of over 85,000 square metres, with white concrete. The gaps between the slabs of material follow an old street map and are large enough to walk on, symbolically bringing the devastated city back to life. The labyrinth-like structure remains in a continuous, intriguing

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51 P. Taranczewski, *O płaszczyźnie obrazu...*, op. cit., s. 12.



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relationship with the landscape. Burri's works share many features with informel and arte povera, but against the background of representatives of both these directions, Burri's works remain as if on the sidelines.

At the same time, another informel painter, Manolo Millares, was developing his career in Spain. Like Burri, he was self-taught, without a diploma from an art academy. Like Burri, he used rough canvas, recovered from old sacks, on which commercial inscriptions were often visible. His *Muros* series from 1954 betrays similarities with the work of Burri, with whom Millares most likely came into contact through a major article in New York's *Art News* magazine.<sup>52</sup> A native of the Canary Islands, the artist, fascinated by the history of the indigenous people - the Guanches - turned to his roots. In a very individual way, he combined tradition and expression, prehistory and contemporary symbolism. With time, Millares radicalised his painterly explorations, employing activities seemingly regarded as "restorative". In 1957, a breakthrough year for the artist, Millares began to number each of his works, with tears revealing the space behind the canvas, expressive, even violent brushstrokes, raw stitching familiar from Jackson Pollock's *Drippings*. For many Spanish viewers, their first impression was

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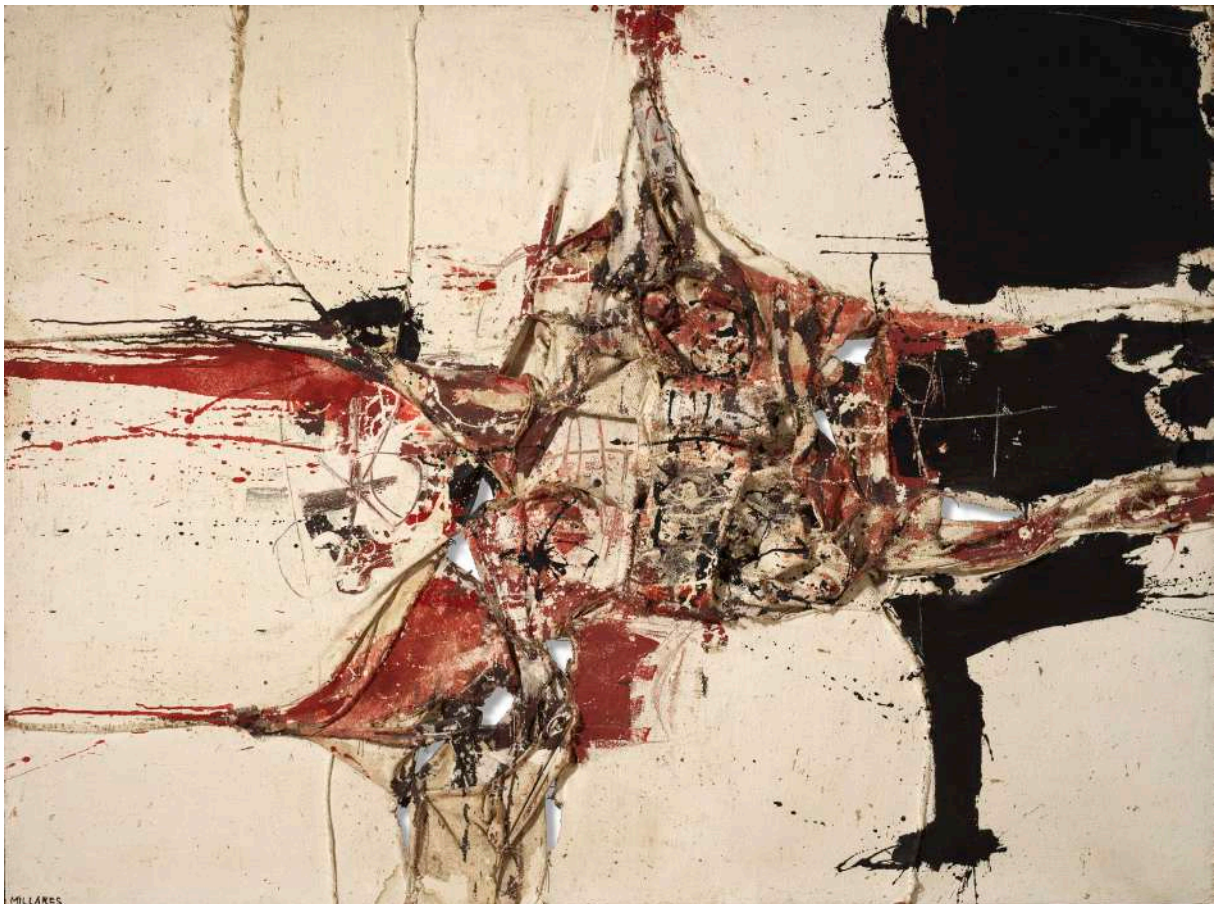
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Cuadro 54  
**Manolo Millares**  
1959

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52 J.M. Bonet, R.M. Mason, M.J. Borja-Villel, *Millares, Saura, Tàpies*, Hiszpania 1990, IVAM, s. 15.





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one of aggression or even insult, directed at them through a repulsive, disgusting work. The author himself emphasised the „ugliness” of his works. In 1959 he declared categorically: „Today we do not believe in art immersed in deliberation”.<sup>53</sup> His paintings are „torn works in which death is ever present, and at the same time timeless, like all classical works”.<sup>54</sup> Awareness of the political situation in which Spain found itself under Franco’s dictatorship, or the whole of Europe suffering after the experience of the Second World War, had a very strong influence on the painter’s work. Millares’ commitment was reflected in the titles of his works and series, which sometimes made violent and sometimes ironic references to current events or to a pessimistic view of the history of the age and the Spanish ‚dark legend’: „from beginning to end (...) he needed, like air, to reflect on the past”.<sup>55</sup>

The experience of Francoism and the horrors of war equally marked the work of Millares’ compatriot, Joan Miró. Miró’s work is difficult to categorise, because although the artist spent his entire life building a coherent narrative, he himself firmly denied belonging to any artistic movement. He was most often associated with the Surrealists, but his consistency in remaining outside any framework allowed him to experiment unhindered. In 1974, a huge retrospective exhibition was planned at the Grand Palais in Paris, where Miró showed, among other things, five works created by painting, then cutting, perforating, splashing paint, pouring petrol on and setting fire to. It is not entirely clear whether the series was a response to the tense political situation in Spain or whether it expressed a desire to radicalise his creative activities. The series on which Miró worked with Josep Royo<sup>56</sup> entitled *Toiles brûlées* (*Burnt Canvases*) aroused great controversy, radically contrasting with the artist’s previous output. Miro used a wet mop and a blowtorch to control the fire and concentrate it in specific areas. The burnt canvases exposed the structures of the stretchers and allowed us to see what is usually behind them. Two of the works were even exhibited in Paris in a way that allowed them to be seen from both sides. Miró chose fire because this element was already close to him through his work with ceramics, and he explained that he loved working with it because it transforms more than it destroys. The works embodied successive attempts to „kill” or „rape” art, as he put it. Jacques Dupin, in his essay for the Grand Palais catalogue, stressed that Miró „chose the violence of fire as his accomplice and partner”.<sup>57</sup> „Murdering” conventional painting techniques was intended to

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53 *Ibidem*, s. 15-16.

54 *Ibidem*, s. 17.

55 *Ibidem*, s. 18.

56 W. Jefett, *Burn, canvas, burn. Joan Miró*, [w:] Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-21-spring-2011/burn-canvas-burn> [access: 28.04.2022].

57 *Ibidem*.



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XXXI

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*Burnt Canvas 4*  
Joan Miró  
1974

give the field to more contemporary means of expression. Miró was known for his radical views on the condition of art and openly expressed his dissatisfaction with the attitudes of curators who made no effort to understand the work, but only tried to imbue it with their philosophical systems. In the case of *Toiles brûlées*, it was about a telling message: a derision of all those who valued Miró's works because of their investment value. The artist did not agree with the reduction of art to an elitist culture and the role of an economic commodity.<sup>58</sup> Joan Miró's actions, which were an act of audacity, unprecedented bravery or true rage (or all of the above), also revealed a deep relationship between the artist and the work, in which the former consciously acted, physically mutilating the latter.

Examples of destructive actions in art can be enumerated further: from the self-destructive art of Gustav Metzger and artists associated with the *Destruction in Art Symposium*, through Jean Tinguely's machine *Tribute to New York* that self-destructs, the collages of Jacques Villeglé and Raymond Hains, tearing off layers of a painting Mino Rotella, to the activity of Gordon Matta Clark, who blurred the boundaries of the notions of destruction and deconstruction by interfering with the substance of buildings with surgical precision. The emerging conceptualism radically changed the rules of the game, as Morawski writes: „from zero and system art to conceptual art, which finally became meta-art,

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*.

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there is a radical turn, i.e. the theoreticalisation of the creative practice itself. [...] this phenomenon [...] is already situated at the very border of art, when the barriers between it and life, play, technology, politics, purely intellectual work, etc. have been almost completely broken down”.<sup>59</sup> As there were more and more artists in the world, there were also more and more activities richer in their diversity. The emerging new era of globalisation and ubiquitous information has meant that „no corner of the Earth is today closed within its geometrical area, its life becomes in many moments the life of the rest of the world. By the fact that, according to the laws of physics, things are located where they are felt, we are now dealing with the true omnipresence of every place on Earth”.<sup>60</sup> The closer we got to the end of the millennium, the more examples of destructive actions in art, or on the borderline of “art” multiplied. At the same time, the meaning of the very notion of “art” became blurred, which was characteristically expressed by Władysław Stróżewski: “freedom in art allows for the possibility of its annihilation. Why is the result of its annihilation still called art? After all, there is no need for axiological nothingness. So maybe this truth needs to be said at last: art, departing from the necessity stemming from the sense and value, loses its identity. Of course, it can become something else, an action, a production, even a birth - but not art”.<sup>61</sup>

I would also like to mention Valerie Hegarty in the context of my series. Coming into contact with her work made me rethink what I myself was doing. Early in her career, Hegarty was engaged in what she called “reverse archaeology”. She glued layers of painted paper to the gallery walls, which she then scraped off to create a material memory of the space. A process very close to *The Photographs/The Removals* of Mikołaj Smoczyński, whose

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59 S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie: od sztuki do po-sztuki...*, op. cit., s. 157.

60 J. Ortega y Gasset, *Dehumanizacja sztuki i inne eseje*, Warszawa 1980, s. 27.

61 W. Stróżewski, *Dialektyka twórczości*, Kraków 1983, Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, s. 286.

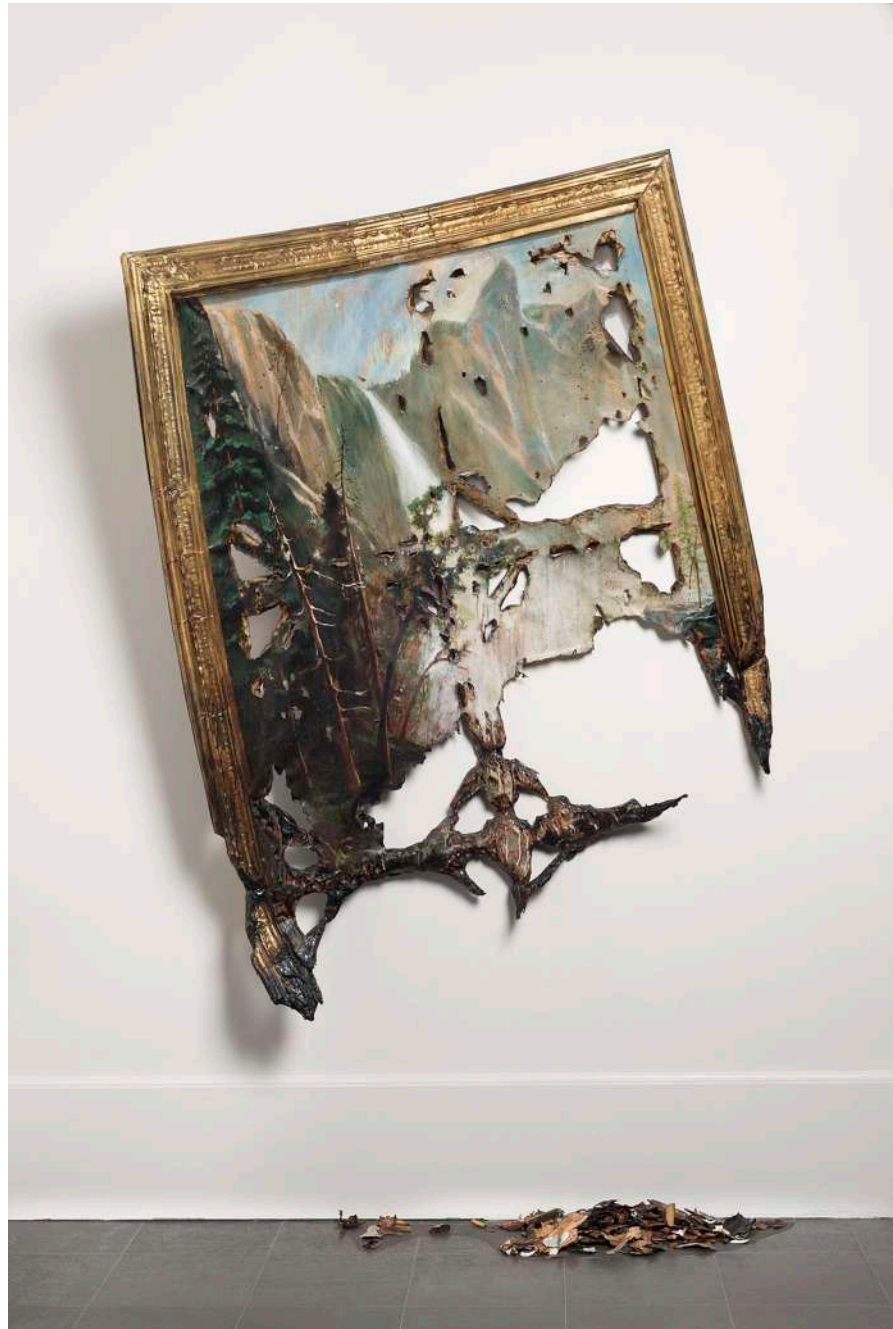


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## XXXII

*Conical Intersect*  
**Gordon Matta Clark**  
1975





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**XXXIII**

*Fallen Bierstadt*  
**Valerie Hegarty**  
2007

work she could encounter in New York. Since 2005, the artist has been making a series of works - objects, using replicas of antiques and paintings of early American art. She presents them, however, destroyed, building a context between the work and the manner of this destruction. In doing so, she addresses issues of memory, place and history, making particular use of „surprising juxtapositions and uncanny transformations in which materials and meanings are constantly shifting”.<sup>62</sup> I have never been interested in the destruction of a work of art in which nothing remains, because this seemed too easy to me. I am fascinated by

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<sup>62</sup> Valerie Hegarty. About. Bio., <https://valeriehegarty.com/news.html> [access: 28.04.2022].

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the contact, the ‚in-between‘ of being and non-being, annihilation and creation. Hegarty’s works are impressive for their theatricality, bordering on the grotesque. The style itself is not close to my heart, but it clearly reflects the character of the „broken” works, which are a commentary on the deteriorating state of American society. The artist captures the moment of the work’s existence between life and death in a particularly suggestive way.

There are many cases of artists destroying their own work, only no one wants to talk about them. Every artist has such an episode. Destroying a work is a response to a failed quest, eliminating a path that turns out to be a dead end and getting rid of the evidence of failure. Pablo Picasso, early in his career, struggling with financial difficulties, often painted over his ‚inferior‘ paintings. Francis Bacon destroyed all his early works. Louise Bourgeois, if she didn’t like a sculpture she made, threw it off the table. Luc Tuymans takes barely a day to paint a painting worth a million dollars and then decides whether to send the finished canvas to his dealer or destroy it. The physical destruction of a work of art is not something difficult. It is the destruction of the idea that this work carries with it that seems impossible nowadays. „Painting is art, and art in general is not the aimless creation of things in the void, but a purposeful force that should serve the development and refinement of the human soul”.<sup>63</sup> It appears to me as an object vulnerable to injury: fragile, dried, scarred, reflecting the world we have created.

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63 W. Kandyński, *O duchowości w sztuce...*, op. cit., s. 125.







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# Broken Images

## 6

Destruction in my work is an activity with a far more cognitive function than creation. The pure act of creation is entangled in its own intentionality, it has its own mass, a weight that crushes its original concept. Destruction is a tool that makes it possible to decompose what has fallen down and covered the junction of being and non-being. The act of creation is reflected in the mirror of its own creation, while destruction allows us to open the door to look at this mystery from the side. Total destruction does not exist: the empty space left by the act of destruction is filled by a new being, and everything takes place according to the principle of linear continuity. Emptiness should not be identified with non-being, because it extends on the border between being and non-being, it is not a negation of being, but precedes it.<sup>64</sup>

The painting series *Broken Images* is a continuation of my previous artistic explorations. I wanted to paint a new picture, based on the works of Raphael, which would be the opposite of what the master from Urbino did. I wanted to see if I would destroy and distort the classical images, would anything happen to the idea of beauty contained in them - would they remain untouched? I used ready-made composition templates, thanks to which I avoided the trap of composition: the ready-made „templates” were already as close as possible to an ideal composition - I could deal with the process of destruction. Being aware that the image of a mother and child carries a huge emotional capacity, I could now fill it with a new weight of meaning. The Raphaelian image of mother and child originally evoked calmness, serenity, gentleness and trust. When I subjected this image to destructive actions, it began to express my own emotions related to the condition of our world: fear, distrust, bitterness, disappointment. The Madonnas in my paintings were no longer beautiful, gentle, alluring. They began to smile through a veil of paint remnants, sadly, as if deprived of their dignity. The feeling of security and carefreeness, so clear in Raphael's works, began to fall to pieces in my works, just like crumbled paint. The first works in the series were more literal - I was not yet able to free myself from the figurative influence of the master from Urbino, although the craquelure obtained on them bursts the painting matter, heralding

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### XXXIV

*Unknown Meaning of the Term „Angry” - detail*  
**Grzegorz Tomczyk**  
2019

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64 S. Marzec, *Sztuka czyli wszystko...*, op. cit., s. 65.

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**XXXV**

*Isn't She Cute?* - detail  
**Grzegorz Tomczyk**  
2021



more radical actions. In subsequent works I intensified my efforts, destroying the constructed order by scratching the canvas even more, painting, splashing, crushing and scraping the paint, creating distorted sgraffito. This had its price as a purely spiritual experience - each successive act of destruction was a raise of the hand against a kind of absolute, both in the form of a divine image and a symbol of the apogee of our civilisation. What I wanted to communicate could not be expressed in any other way; these paintings were supposed to be ugly although they should be beautiful, they were supposed to be disturbing although the image of the Madonna should bring solace. My paintings are not a hedonistic „whimsy”, a destruction at will or out of the need of the moment - they foretell the moment when everything will have to be destroyed in order to build a new temple of truth on the ruins. I succeeded in liberating myself from Raphael's figurative imperative in my latest works, when I left legible only the general outline of the composition by indicating the contours of the figures. I interpret this in a symbolic way: when I started the details of the figures were visible and the faces recognizable, while as the work progressed these things began to blur, disappear under the paint or fall off with it, leaving a void. The places torn away from the painting matter, this peculiar craquelure, seem to be what I am looking for - a crack to peep into the mysteries of being and non-being, chaos and cosmos, the birthplace of the idea of beauty. Colour is also a means of expression in the paintings of my series:

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I use strong colours in narrow ranges. For me, colour is a carrier of emotions and the content they contain. It was also another means of breaking the dictates of classical beauty.

Paradoxically, in spite of the fact that destruction, disintegration and decay evoke negative feelings in the viewer, and are therefore undesirable, destruction can be pleasing. It is a manifestation of the classical love of death: man is afraid of it, it is taboo for him because he exists in the culture of life, and on the other hand he is able to watch it, to be fascinated by it, he has grown accustomed to the sight of it. Many times I tried to reject the aesthetic sacrum, turning to matter, but it seems that the idea of beauty is simply so deeply rooted in man that it makes it impossible to overcome the aesthetic dimension of the image. In my works I have managed to break with the classical representation of beauty, but it seems that the artist is not able to get rid of this innate sense of taste, the hearing of the eye, which makes him aestheticize his own actions. Were the paintings of the Informelists really ugly, or did they only refer to ugly associations through form, colour, texture? Is a conscious artist able to create an ugly painting, or is it precisely what makes him an artist, that he is much more sensitive to beauty than other people and therefore cannot free himself from the imperative to aestheticize? A certain brutality of my works is indisputable, but I realised long ago that this is also a style - dirty, scratched, paint-splattered paintings - and that I will find recipients who will like this dirt, this scratching, this despair, which is why the rebellion to create only „ugly” works is not entirely possible.

The central point of my work was to trace the relationship between destruction and the idea of beauty, and the influence of the former on the latter. I managed to change the original overtone of the image of the mother and child and imbue it with a new layer of meaning. The most difficult to evaluate is the process of destruction of the idea of beauty itself. Agnes Martin in her essay „Beauty is the secret of life” (1989) wrote that „when a beautiful rose dies, beauty does not die, because it is not really in the rose. Beauty is consciousness in the mind. It is our mental and emotional reaction”.<sup>65</sup> This assessment is difficult because art itself, which is the apotheosis of beauty, is not subject to the active powers of logic and reason. I want to believe that there is an absolute, eternal and indisputable beauty, precisely in the form of an idea. But as an artist, I am far more fascinated by the fact that beauty can take on such a variety of forms, that it is subjective, that it changes and evolves, that it is influenced by time and circumstances, and that everyone can interpret it according to themselves. It is the pursuit of the ideal that makes sense, its achievement marks the end of the action.

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65 E. Prettejohn, *Beauty & Art...*, op. cit., s. 202.







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# Conclusion

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When I began work on the series *Broken Images. Destruction Against the Idea of Beauty*, I was, above all, goal-oriented and wanted to find answers to the questions I had posed: about the essence of the idea of beauty, about its vitality and susceptibility to destruction. And once again I found out that as an artist I am more fascinated with the process itself than with the goal, because it is the process that dispels doubts and brings answers. Sometimes it also raises new questions, but nevertheless it is always a path on which one walks, not a wall along which one strolls. The passage of time is the greatest constant in our lives. Everything is subordinated to it. And it is also a process of progressing seconds, hours, days, years, which no matter can resist. Attempts to preserve it are noble, for how else to judge all the heroic effort put into fighting for the survival of the most precious artefacts of art? But one day the Mona Lisa will lay to waste. And Raphael's Madonnas. And the *Broken Images*. They will turn into ashes, which will be blown away by the wind and fall to the ground together with other particles. A work of art already belongs to the past at the moment of its creation, but its beauty lies in the present moment, in every second of the observer's gaze.<sup>66</sup> Despite the aspect of physicality accentuated in this statement, it is important to emphasise that it is we who give meaning. It is we who read the idea, because we are capable of doing so. Therefore, even in the case of the physical destruction of a work of art, beauty will survive as an idea and will last as long as we last. It is worth noting that the indestructibility of an idea does not exclude its transformations: ideas can intertwine, interact, influence each other's meanings: some particle of the classical Raphaelian ideal is still present in my paintings, but the reception of created works is now, among other things, the effect of fusion with my ideas. There is beauty in art, and this is also beautiful in art, that it is "an awareness of the multidimensionality of existence. And it is still alive, its new perspectives are still possible".<sup>67</sup>

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XXXVI

*Did You Miss Me?* - detail  
Grzegorz Tomczyk  
2019

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66 Loc. cit.

67 S. Marzec, *Sztuka czyli wszystko...*, op. cit., s. 136.





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# Reproductions of works



*Isn't She Lovely?*  
2022, original technique, 200 x 170 cm



*The Lights Are All On but Nobody's Home*  
2018, original technique, 80 x 60 cm





*They Made Me To Feel Polish, Do They?*  
2018, original technique, 80 x 60 cm



*New Hope for a Dead Scene*  
2019, original technique, 80 x 60 cm





*Isn't She Cute?*  
2021, original technique, 100 x 73 cm





*No Boundaries*  
2019, original technique, 73 x 50 cm



*Did You Miss Me?*  
2021, original technique, 90 x 60 cm





*No Blessings*  
2021, original technique, 73 x 50 cm





*There Was a Boy Who Heard the Whisper of the Stones*  
2015, original technique, 94 x 75 cm





*Isn't She Happy?*  
2022, original technique, 190 x 152 cm





*There Was a Boy Who Had Too Many Toys*  
2018, original technique, 94 x 75 cm





*Precious*  
2017, original technique, 86 x 66 cm





*Isn't She Pretty?*  
2022, original technique, 170 x 130 cm





*Isn't She Calm?*  
2019, original technique, 80 x 60 cm





*Unknown Meaning of the Term 'Fear'*  
2022, original technique, 96 x 71 cm





*Unknown Meaning of the Term 'Angry'*  
2019, original technique, 80 x 60 cm





*Let Hours Pass*  
2015, original technique, 94 x 75 cm





*In the Glow of the Brightest of Stars*  
2018, original technique, 80 x 60 cm





XXXVI

*Die Sieben Siegel, die  
geheime Offenbarung des  
Johannes / Siedem Pieczęci,  
Tajemne Objawienie Jana*  
**Anselm Kiefer**  
2019



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- XXIII **Lucio Fontana** *Concetto Spaziale Attese* 1959, photo [https://archive.org/details/2017CKS144410114000lucioFontanaConcettoSpazialeAttese/2015\\_CKS\\_11005\\_0129\\_000%28lucio\\_fontana\\_concetto\\_spaziale\\_attese%29.jpg](https://archive.org/details/2017CKS144410114000lucioFontanaConcettoSpazialeAttese/2015_CKS_11005_0129_000%28lucio_fontana_concetto_spaziale_attese%29.jpg)
- XXIV **Robert Rauschenberg** *Erased de Koonig drawing* 1953, photo <https://www.sfmoma.org/>
- XXV **César Baldaccini** *Facel Vega* 1962, photo <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/cesar-baldaccini/>
- XXVI **John Chamberlain** *Untitled* 1962, photo <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2020/contemporary-art-day-auction/john-chamberlain-untitled>
- XXVII **Alberto Burri** *Sacchi* 1955, photo <https://www.rivistastudio.com/un-insulso-pittore-di-sacchi-al-guggenheim/>
- XXVIII **Alberto Burri** *Legno e bianco I* 1956, photo <https://manpodcast.com/portfolio/no-206-emily-braun-abby-subak/>
- XXIX **Alberto Burri** *Grande Cretto Nero* 1977, photo Grzegorz Tomczyk
- XXX **Manolo Millares** *Cuadro 54* 1959, photo <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-manolo-millares-cuadro-54-6269965/>
- XXXI **Joan Miro** *Burnt Canvas 4* 1974, photo [https://arhive.com/fr/publications/4404~7\\_stories\\_about\\_things\\_that\\_inspired\\_Joan\\_Mir](https://arhive.com/fr/publications/4404~7_stories_about_things_that_inspired_Joan_Mir)
- XXXII **Gordon Matta Clark** *Conical Intersect* 1975, photo [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8\\_laap8y5c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8_laap8y5c)
- XXXII **Valerie Hogarty** *Fallen Bierstadt* 2007, photo <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/184064>
- XXXIII **Grzegorz Tomczyk** *Unknown Meaning of the Term 'Angry'* 2019, detail, photo Grzegorz Tomczyk
- XXXIV **Grzegorz Tomczyk** *Isn't She Cute?* 2021, detail, photo Grzegorz Tomczyk
- XXXV **Grzegorz Tomczyk** *Did You Miss Me?* 2019, detail, photo Grzegorz Tomczyk
- XXXVI **Anselm Kiefer** *Die Sieben Siegel, die geheime Offenbarung des Johannes / The Seven Seals, the Secret Revelation of John* 2019, detail, photo Grzegorz Tomczyk
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