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DESTROY, SHE SAID

The Boiler, New York

From a commercial perspective, a work of art is destroyed when damage renders it unsellable. In this state, it is no longer art, but what art insurers term 'salvage art'. Usually condemned to storage, examples of these damaged works made a rare public appearance in 2012 for Elka Krajewska's 'No Longer Art: Salvage Art Institute' at Columbia University, New York. Opening just weeks after Hurricane Sandy devastated galleries in Manhattan's Chelsea neighbourhood, the exhibition showed that art which is financially dead is still of enduring worth to scholars and curators. But what of damage's worth to contemporary artists?

Curators Saul Anton and Ethan Spigland addressed this question in 'Destroy, she said' at The Boiler, which proved that the deliberate destruction of art by artists can be a highly generative act. The exhibition's premise – inviting 13 New York-based and international artists to destroy one of their own works and to display the results – was deceptively simple. Walking into the gallery, I half expected a bleak art graveyard of scorched canvases and shattered glass, but found instead a range of thoughtful approaches that, for the most part, did not initially look like acts of destruction.

In many cases, the prompt led to entirely new work. Olav Westphalen's series of 'Drawings, 1996-2007' (2015) outlines how seven of his pieces were ruined or abandoned: drawings stuck in limbo after a falling out with their co-author, for instance, or a sculpture project that lost its institutional backing. In the video *Destruction of Screen Shadow #10 (stain)*, 2010 (2014), Miranda Lichtenstein digitally inserted her photograph *Screen Shadow #10 (stain)* into a low-budget advertisement for a shredding service. Beth Campbell's vertically scrolling *Destruction of My Potential Future ... Sketch (6/8/11)* (2014) layered video clips documenting her attempts to destroy an old sketch through various means ranging from a blender to a boy bouncing on it on top of a bed.

The looping videos – in particular Campbell's cyclical work, repeat acts of destruction ad infinitum – raising the question, is the destruction of art possible in an era of

digital reproduction and large device memory? Anton and Spigland's Foundation for Destroyed Art, a web home that preserves destroyed art created in tandem with the show, seems to think not, though several contributions to 'Destroy, she said' contradicted this. Dexter Sinister's *Destruction of Solstice* – an over-exposure to light of their 35mm slide work *Solstice* (2013) – demonstrates that all technology is vulnerable to obsolescence and defect. Ward Shelley's *Destruction of 'I Am a Hunger Artist'* (2015), a declaration to forget his mother's artwork, undermines the importance of technology altogether by claiming that art endures not in device but in human memory, while Jeanine Oleson's *Destruction of Here, Hear* (2014) showed the extent of memory's failings. She recorded the cast of *Here, Hear* (debuted in 2014 at the New Museum, New York) fumbling through cues and lines as they attempted to re-perform her 23-part experimental opera from memory.

Human error also played a role in Nina Katchadourian's *Monument to the Unelected*, a 2008-commissioned work comprising historical reproductions of 56 electoral lawn signs rallying for US presidential candidates, and later found to contain errors. As Katchadourian's engrossing installation chronicles, she recruited the help of staff from the museums that displayed the work – and who were often the first to spot its flaws – to break or deface the offending signs.

Like Westphalen's tale of an abandoned art project, Katchadourian's installation exposes the fact that any large-scale commission involves multiple actors, all of whom shape its outcome. For *Maps of Hope* (2015), Bob and Roberta Smith put two illustrated paper maps on the ground and let them turn to tatters under visitors' feet – a participatory gesture that saved the work from feeling too simple.

Art wreckage, as the curators acknowledge, was a key idea of many movements during the 1960s and '70s. With rare exception, the works in 'Destroy, she said' revived that tradition to offer a contemporary vision of destruction relevant to today's tech-permeated world. As demonstrated here, art production is not a linear process but, rather, a constant cycle of creation, destruction and reinterpretation that cannot be thwarted by a paint chip or ceramic crack.

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