

**Preserving the unpreservable:  
A study of destruction art in the contemporary museum**

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## **Introduction**

Art scholar Norbert Lynton writes in *The Story of Modern Art*, that “a museum that allocates funds to acquiring a piece of auto-destructive art is attacking the very role of museums”.<sup>1</sup> This role, to preserve artworks for the benefit of future generations, has remained a fundamental tenet of the art museum since its origins. Yet, beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of new destructive and ephemeral art forms, this role has been increasingly challenged. For as long as artists have created destruction artworks, museums have made it their duty to collect them. Often the motivations and intentions behind these artworks are at odds with or in opposition to museological values such as permanence, preservation, and historicity. Today, museums continue to collect, document, preserve, and interpret destruction artworks, recognised as vital artifacts in our understanding of the history and progress of modern and contemporary art.

Decisions to collect and preserve destruction artworks are case-specific and require a thorough examination of artists' intentions. This paper will argue that, due to the individual nature of artistic intentionality, there is no comprehensive model for the preservation of destruction art. An analysis of several key case studies shows the importance of research, documentation, and deliberation in developing preservation strategies for destruction artworks. In each case, museum professionals must achieve a fine balance between respect for artists' intentions and allegiance to the museum's mandate to collect and preserve works of art for the future. This paper will examine the origins and extent of destruction art in the museum in order to explore the

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<sup>1</sup> Lynton, Norbert. *The Story of Modern Art*. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980), p. 327.

underlying relationship between the seemingly conflicting values of preservation and destruction.

### **Methodology**

A variety of primary and secondary sources have been consulted in writing this paper. These include published works on intentionality in art criticism, art history, museum studies, and fine arts conservation. Unpublished works consulted include Kristine Stile's PhD dissertation entitled *The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Social. Project of Event and Structured Art*. Artist writings and interviews have been incorporated, as have other primary source documents including museum conservation records and writings by museum professionals, a selection of which were solicited for this paper through the use of museum questionnaires.

### **Destruction art: A definition**

This paper uses a broad definition of destruction art to include artworks in which the means, materials, and/or intentions are manifestly destructive. Given the wide range of this definition, examples will centre around the auto-destructive art movement, which began in the early the 1960s and had as its centre, the *Destruction in Art Symposium* (DIAS) held in London in 1966. The artists Gustav Metzger and Raphael Montañez Ortiz are among the most enduring activists of what could loosely be termed the auto-destructive art movement, both for their roles in organising DIAS-related events and for their long-term involvement in this art form. The Swiss artist Jean Tinguely while he was not present at DIAS, developed a form of auto-destructive art independently during the same period and will likewise be included in

the central focus of this paper. In addition to the auto-destructive art movement of the 1960s, this paper will include references to other artistic movements including Dadaism, Futurism, action art, and contemporary forms of ephemeral and installation-based art.

It will be understood from this designation that destruction art is a relatively wide field, which encompasses many distinct movements related in their use of destructive materials, techniques, actions, and/or intentions. Professor Kristine Stiles, a leading authority on destruction art, defines it as:

Interdisciplinary and multinational, combining media and subject matter. Destruction art addresses the phenomenology and epistemology of destruction and must be characterized as a broad, cross-cultural response rather than a historical movement. An attitude, a process and a way of proceeding, destruction art is both reactionary and responsive; it is not an aesthetic, nor a method, nor a technique. Destruction art is an ethical position comprised of diverse practices that investigate the engulfments of terminal culture.<sup>2</sup>

Stiles's definition of destruction art stresses the significance of attitudinal and ethical factors in the designation of destruction artworks. This understanding anticipates a study of artists' intentions, which constitute, to some extent, the boundaries of this art form.

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<sup>2</sup> Stiles, Kristine. 'Thresholds of Control: Destruction Art and Terminal Culture', *Out of Control* (1991): 29-50, (reprinted in *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future, A Survey of Two Decades*, ed. Timothy Druckrey, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), p. 1 (reprint).

The artist Gustav Metzger, who first coined the term “auto-destructive art” in his 1959 manifesto of the same name,<sup>3</sup> has defined this art form as:

Art which contains within itself an agent which automatically leads to its destruction within a period of time not to exceed twenty years. Other forms of auto-destructive art involve manual manipulation. There are forms of auto-destructive art where the artist has a tight control over the nature and timing of the disintegrative process, and there are other forms where the artist's control is slight.<sup>4</sup>

Metzger's definition evokes broader aspects of ephemeral art forms whose lifespan may differ and in which the artist's control over the destruction process is, itself, variable. That the term “auto-destructive art” may be used equally to refer to these art forms gives it a similarly open-ended definition.

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3 Metzger, Gustav. 'Auto-Destructive Art' (1959), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* ed. Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (LA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 401.

4 Metzger, Gustav. 'Manifesto: Auto-Destructive Art' (1960), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* ed. Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (LA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 402.

### **Origins of destruction art: From anti-art to anti-museum**

As art historian John Fisher writes in his article, *Destruction as a Mode of Creation*, the forces of creativity and nihilism have traditionally been considered as opposite poles:

Destruction has always meant the change of an organized object into a relatively disorganized one, or the annihilation of the features which made it what it once was. Artistic creation has always meant a new order, the bringing into being of something new, or the translation of knowledge or idea into a new form, with form always indicating a spatial object.<sup>5</sup>

The advent of destruction art brought into question traditional assumptions about art. Not only was the primacy of the object challenged, as it was in contemporaneous manifestations of performance art; with destruction art, the very act of creation, so central to previous art practices, was disputed.<sup>6</sup> In challenging these aspects in their art, destruction artists essentially challenge the fundamental foundations of the museum.

One of the earliest art movements to question the museum's role in society was Italian Futurism of the early 1900s. In his *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909, the poet and founder of the movement, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, wrote in no uncertain terms of his feelings towards museums:

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<sup>5</sup> Fisher, John. 'Destruction as a Mode of Creation', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 8, no. 2 (April 1974), p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> Stiles, Kristine. *The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Cultural Project of Event-Structured Live Art*, PhD Dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), p. 640.

We want to demolish museums and libraries...Museums, cemeteries!...Let the good incendiaries with charred fingers come! Here they are! Heap up the fire to the shelves of the libraries! Divert the canals to flood the cellars of the museums!...For art can be only violence, cruelty, injustice.<sup>7</sup>

Other avant-garde writers of the period, such as Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara, similarly urged the burning of all books and libraries.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary artist and museum curator Mark Dion constructs a lineage between the museum-skeptical avant-garde, most notably Marcel Duchamp and Luis Buñuel, and a generation of artists emerging in the late 1960s, who denounced museums as “un-correctable sites of ideology”.<sup>9</sup> Surrealist film director Buñuel records in his memoirs that the surrealists, as a group, “all felt a certain destructive impulse, that for me has been even stronger than the creative urge. The idea of burning down a museum, for instance, has always seemed more enticing than the opening of a cultural center”.<sup>10</sup> The violent rhetoric of iconoclasm evident in avant-garde movements of this period is further explored by Dario Gamboni in his history, *The Destruction of Art*, in which he relates the iconoclastic terminology utilised by radical art movements of the early-twentieth century to the fulfillment of auto-destructive art of the 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Marinetti, F.T. 'The Futurist Manifesto' (1909), in Ferrier, Jean-Louis et al, *Art of Our Century: The Chronicle of Western Art, 1900 to the Present* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1988), p. 99.

8 Hansen, Al. 'Life in Destruction', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 5 (August 1966), p. 35.

9 Endt, Marion. 'Beyond institutional critique: Mark Dion's surrealist wunderkammer at the Manchester Museum', *Museum and Society*, vol. 5, no. 1 (March 2007), p. 2.

10 Buñuel, Luis. *My Last Sigh*. Trans. Abigail Israel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 107.

11 Gamboni, Dario. *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).



It is significant that several destruction artists of the 1960s listed Dadaists and Futurists among their primary influences. Artist Gustav Metzger has said that “auto-destructive art has its roots in the Dada movement, in Russian Revolutionary art generally and in Moholy-Nagy particularly”.<sup>12</sup> In his book *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art*, Metzger explains how movements such as Futurism and Dadaism “contained tremendous explosive, destructive force. The artists were not only concerned to destroy, deform and transform previous styles, they wanted to destroy and bend to their wills entire social systems”.<sup>13</sup> In an act of homage, '60s destruction artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz dedicated several of his works to Richard Huelsenbeck, a poet and writer credited with founding the Dada movement in Berlin.<sup>14</sup>

In an article entitled *The Art of Destruction*, curator Daniel Birnbaum argues that the iconoclastic rhetoric found in the manifestos of the early avant-garde prepared the ground for and, in a sense, legitimised, actual destructive artworks which ensued.<sup>15</sup> While it is questionable whether the later actions of destruction artists can be directly attributed to the influence of these earlier movements, it is certainly true, as destruction artist Al Hansen points out, that “some individual Dadaists and the Futurists as a group were messengers of destruction art”.<sup>16</sup> Several key works from these movements serve as illustrations of this point.

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12 Gustav Metzger, paraphrased in Wolfram, Eddie. 'In the Beginning was the word', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 5 (August 1966), p. 65.

13 Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art*. (London: Coracle, 1996), p. 25.

14 Anon. 'Works in the Exhibition', *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz*. (NJ: New Jersey: Jersey City Museum, 2007), p. 43.

15 Birnbaum, Daniel. 'The Art of Destruction', *Frieze*, issue 35 (Summer 1997), p. 37.

16 Hansen, Al. 'Life in Destruction', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 5 (August 1966), p. 35.

In 1919, Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp outlined one of the earliest recorded models of artistic auto-destruction. The piece, *Unhappy Readymade*, consisted of a geometry book hanging by strings on a balcony. While the original was destroyed by natural forces in accordance with Duchamp's intentions, its image was preserved and commemorated by a photograph and a painting based on it by the artist's sister, Suzanne Duchamp.<sup>17</sup> Thus, *Unhappy Readymade* became, perhaps, the earliest example of documentation in destruction art.

In spite of Duchamp's use of destructive technique, the artist was not against museums. In fact, Duchamp actively collaborated on the acquisition and preservation of his works by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. When asked during an interview in 1967 why he had accepted that all his works should be placed in a museum, Duchamp answered that there were “practical things in life that one can't stop”, and that he could have “torn them up or broken them, [but] that would have been an idiotic gesture”.<sup>18</sup>

At the *Dada Vorfrühling*<sup>19</sup> exhibition staged in Cologne in 1920, Dadaist artist Max Ernst famously attached a hatchet to one of his sculptures, which visitors then destroyed in accordance with his intentions.<sup>20</sup> At a similar demonstration in Paris, Dadaist artist Francis Picabia presented a large drawing on a blackboard. Each section was wiped off before starting the next. The latter example would later be

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17 Gamboni, Dario. *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 272.

18 Ibid., p. 285.

19 Translation: *Dada Early Spring*.

20 Lippard, Lucy R. and John Chandler. 'The Dematerialization of Art', *Art International*, vol. 12, no. 2 (February 1968), p. 34.

cited by artist Gustav Metzger as “an early form of auto-destructive art”.<sup>21</sup>

In 1922, Surrealist artist Man Ray first assembled his influential artwork, *Object To Be Destroyed*.<sup>22</sup> In his instructions for creating this destructible, repeatable work, Man Ray wrote:

Cut out the eye from a photograph of one who has been loved but is seen no more. Attach the eye to the pendulum of a metronome and regulate the weight to suit the tempo desired. Keep going to the limit of endurance. With a hammer well-aimed, try to destroy the whole thing at a single blow.<sup>23</sup>

With these words, writes art historian Janine Mileaf, “Man Ray declared an art object that was at the edge of his control...Reproduction and demolition were sanctioned”.<sup>24</sup> Curator Piet de Jonge designates Man Ray's *Object To Be Destroyed* as an influential work in the evolution of non-traditional art forms.<sup>25</sup> With the advent of this piece, it became apparent that art was no longer merely contained in the object, but also included the actions surrounding the object. De Jonge uses Man Ray's seminal hammer blow as a metaphor for the inherently destructive qualities of ephemeral art in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> The author credits Man Ray with the creation of an entirely new category of object: the “objects to be destroyed”, that is:

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21 Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art*. (London: Coracle, 1996), p. 30.

22 Later incarnations of this work have been collected by several museums including the Tate Gallery in London.

23 Ray, Man. 'Object of Destruction', *This Quarter*. vol. 5, no. 1, (September 1932) in Mileaf, Janine. 'Between you and me: Man Ray's Object to be Destroyed', *Art Journal* (March 22, 2004), p. 1.

24 Mileaf, Janine. 'Between you and me: Man Ray's Object to be Destroyed', *Art Journal*, (22 March 2004), p. 1.

25 De Jonge, Piet. 'Man Ray, or the Eternal Theme of the Wink', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), pp. 210-211.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

The notion of an art work with a short life span, the notion that an object could be made that had a deliberately short existence – only after it had been destroyed did Man Ray consider the work complete. With this he created the direct counterpart to art works that had been made to last for eternity.<sup>27</sup>

Mileaf suggests that the performance aspect of Man Ray's desire to destroy the object before an audience anticipated the advent of performance art during the 1960s.<sup>28</sup>

With the destruction and continual recreation of the physical work, the object's significance, once paramount in the museum, became contestable. For Man Ray, “destruction did not mean the end of the object, it afforded new possibilities”.<sup>29</sup> In spite the work's ominous title and its incorporation of destruction as an artistic technique, it is evident that Man Ray never intended the piece to disappear.<sup>30</sup>

We find the destructive impulse again in post-war art movements, with the advent of abstract expressionism and action art. One of the most influential 'destruction' works of the post-war period was Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), in which the artist systematically and symbolically erased a drawing by his established colleague, artist Willem de Kooning. According to art historian Rocio Aranda-Alvarado, rather than seeing this act as the destruction of a work, Rauschenberg saw it as a different kind of creative act, one that would employ an eraser to create a drawing.<sup>31</sup>

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27 *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

28 Mileaf, Janine. 'Between you and me: Man Ray's Object to be Destroyed', *Art Journal*, (22 March 2004), p. 14.

29 De Jonge, Piet. 'Man Ray, or the Eternal Theme of the Wink', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), p. 210.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

31 Aranda-Alvarado, Rocio. *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz*. (NJ: New Jersey: Jersey City Museum, 2007), p. 6.

Action art of the 1950s expressed a violent and very public engagement between artists and their materials.<sup>32</sup> The Gutai Group of painters and performers in Japan (1954-1958) took destruction art to a new level. Stiles writes that the Gutai “introduced event-structured art...an art in which the artist and the beholder might both aspire to 'become' anew”.<sup>33</sup> Films such as *Gutai on Stage* (1957), and *Gutai Painting* (1960), show artists 'shooting' at canvases with arrows tipped with paint, pounding them with paint-filled boxing gloves, and crashing through paintings with their own bodies, as did Saburo Murakami in *Breaking through Many Screens of Paper* (1956).<sup>34</sup> Following their first exhibition, the Gutai Group reportedly burned all of the works from the show in a collective bonfire.<sup>35</sup> As time went on, however, the Gutai artists became more eager to have their anti-art actions seen and recorded,<sup>36</sup> and in the end came to realise the importance of documentation in the longevity of their performance works.<sup>37</sup>

Similar in form to the works of the Gutai Group were the 'shoot paintings' of French artist, Niki de Saint Phalle. Saint Phalle began creating these pieces in 1961 by firing with a .22-caliber rifle at her own assemblages containing aerosol paint cans and

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32 Rush, Michael. 'A Noisy Silence', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 21, no. 1 (January 1999), p. 5.

33 Stiles, Kristine. *The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Cultural Project of Event-Structured Live Art*, PhD Dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), p. 647.

34 Rush, Michael. 'A Noisy Silence', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 21, no. 1 (January 1999), p. 5.

35 Anon. 'Performance Art', Art and Culture Online. (<http://www.artandculture.com/cgi-bin/WebObjects/ACLive.woa/wa/movement?id=1026>), 28 July 2007.

36 Rush, Michael. 'A Noisy Silence', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 21, no. 1 (January 1999), p. 5.

37 Anon. 'Performance Art', Art and Culture Online. (<http://www.artandculture.com/cgi-bin/WebObjects/ACLive.woa/wa/movement?id=1026>), 28 July 2007.

balloons filled with colored pigments that exploded and burst on contact.<sup>38</sup> During the 1960s Saint Phalle's partner, Jean Tinguely, would become known as one of the most renowned destruction artists.

Destructive action art continued into the 1960s, growing more extreme with the advent of the Wiener Aktionisten<sup>39</sup>, a group who exalted 'destruction' as a primary pathway to artistic and social freedom through violence and self-mutilation.<sup>40</sup> In a statement released in 1963, Actionist Otto Muehl writes, "I can imagine nothing significant where nothing is sacrificed, destroyed, dismembered, burnt, pierced, tormented, harassed, tortured, massacred...stabbed, or annihilated".<sup>41</sup>

### **DIAS: The Destruction in Art Symposium**

In 1966 many destruction artists had their first international appearance at the *Destruction in Art Symposium* (DIAS) in London.<sup>42</sup> DIAS was an important event in identifying international artists who pioneered destruction art during the 1960s.<sup>43</sup>

"The artists who attended DIAS", writes Stiles, "questioned not only the status of the object, but the function and role of the artist as well".<sup>44</sup> Around 100 artists and poets from 18 countries contributed to DIAS. Contributors sent photographs, original

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38 Stiles, Kristine. 'Material Culture and Everyday Life' in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* ed. Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (LA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 285.

39 Translation: Viennese Actionists.

40 Rush, Michael. 'A Noisy Silence', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 21, no. 1 (January 1999), p. 5.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

42 Generali Foundation. 'Press Release', *Gustav Metzger: History History*, (10 May 2007) ([http://foundation.generalifoundation.at/fileadmin/grafikpool/downloads/Downloads\\_Metzger/presse\\_metzger\\_e.pdf](http://foundation.generalifoundation.at/fileadmin/grafikpool/downloads/Downloads_Metzger/presse_metzger_e.pdf)), 28 July 2007.

43 Stiles, Kristine. 'Thresholds of Control: Destruction Art and Terminal Culture', *Out of Control* (1991): 29-50, (reprinted in *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future, A Survey of Two Decades*, ed. Timothy Druckrey, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), p. 9 (reprint).

44 Stiles, Kristine. *The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Cultural Project of Event-Structured Live Art*, PhD Dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), p. 640.

artworks, documentation, and theoretical texts to be exhibited.<sup>45</sup> The DIAS symposium brought together an international group of avant-garde artists working with new art forms generally associated with the happenings, Fluxus, and anti-art movements.<sup>46</sup> For the organisers these artists marked a shift from the 'idea of destruction' since Futurism and Dadaism to destruction as artistic 'practice'.<sup>47</sup>

Over 21 artists from eight different countries took part in the proceedings, which included workshops, performances, conferences, and happenings.<sup>48</sup> The artist Al Hansen, who was present at the Symposium, describes a typical programme at DIAS:

Tony West running classic books through a crank meat grinder, Schreib artfully burning large photos of Willy Brandt...Al Hansen exploded a big motorscooter...Ralph Ortiz demolished a piano with a sledgehammer...Pro-Diaz exploded pyrotechnic powders and fuse cords on three large painted surfaces...John Latham burned several Skoob Towers of Encyclopedia Britannicas...Wolf Vostell of Germany destroyed TV images with paint, food and manual controls.<sup>49</sup>

DIAS 1966 was followed by similar events in the U.S., including a second symposium which took place in Judson Church and its adjoining gallery in

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45 Stiles, Kristine. 'The Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium and the "DIAS Affect"', in *Gustav Metzger: History History* ed. Breitwieser, Sabine (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2005), p. 41.

46 Noriega, Chon A. 'Sacred Contingencies: The Digital Deconstructions of Raphael Montanez Ortiz', *Art Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4, (Winter 1995), p. 36.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

48 Aranda-Alvarado, Rocio. *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz*. (NJ: New Jersey: Jersey City Museum, 2007), p. 7.

49 Hansen, Al. 'London: Destruction in Art Symposium', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 41, (November 1966), p. 54.

Greenwich Village, New York.<sup>50</sup> During this symposium, artists organised a series of events entitled *12 Evenings of Manipulations*, in which destructive processes were included in many actions.<sup>51</sup> Artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz created the work *Destruction Room*, in which the contents of a room were systematically destroyed. This work was later recreated during a retrospective of the artist's work at *El Museo del Barrio* in 1988. The New York DIAS symposium attracted much media attention, as did a subsequent exhibition entitled, *Destruction Art: Destroy to Create*, organised at the Finch College Museum of Art in New York in 1968, which featured works by Raphael Montañez Ortiz, Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, and others.<sup>52</sup>

#### **Case studies: An introduction to key destruction artworks**

The artists chosen for the case studies: Jean Tinguely, Gustav Metzger, and Raphael Montañez Ortiz, are today considered among the primary figures of destruction art for their roles in pioneering the use of destructive materials and techniques in modern art. The artworks outlined here have been selected from museums in the U.S. and the U.K. as works which typify destruction art of the 1960s. These works represent a full spectrum of techniques and materials, comprising aspects of painting, sculpture, kinetic, and performance art. With the exception of Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York*, these artworks have been recreated for museum exhibitions and retrospectives.

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50 Aranda-Alvarado, Rocio. *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz*. (NJ: New Jersey: Jersey City Museum, 2007), p. 8.

51 Ferguson, Russell ed. *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, (LA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), p. 273.

52 Aranda-Alvarado, Rocio. *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz*. (NJ: New Jersey: Jersey City Museum, 2007), p. 8.



### **Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York* (1960)**

Swiss artist Jean Tinguely (1925-1991) began independently producing auto-destructive sculptures in 1960. Art historian Frank Popper writes that, while Tinguely did not actually use the term “auto-destruction” for the nihilistic or anarchistic attitude which he adopted, the destructive idea as a demonstration would dominate his activity throughout the following two years.<sup>53</sup> Among Tinguely's output of this period was his *Machine for Breaking Sculpture*, a piece which, perhaps not surprisingly given its title, has since disappeared.<sup>54</sup> Philip Long, a senior curator at the National Museum of Modern Art in Edinburgh, recalls a similar piece at the Tate Gallery entitled *Sculpture That Cuts Itself in Half*, a machine which slowly sawed through itself.<sup>55</sup>

Throughout the early 1960s, Tinguely produced a series of large auto-destructive 'machine-happenings'<sup>56</sup> including *Etude pour un fin du monde*,<sup>57</sup> which Tinguely described as a “monstre-sculpture-autodéstructive-dynamique et aggressive”.<sup>58</sup> This piece, which incorporated the use of fireworks, self-destructed in 1961 in front of an audience of nearly 1,500 people at the opening of the *Movement in Art* exhibition at the Louisiana Museum, Denmark. A year later, at the request of the American television network NBC, Tinguely constructed *End of the World No. 2* in the Nevada desert near Los Angeles. Described as “l'opéra-burlesque-dramatico-big-thing-

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53 Popper, Frank, 'Tinguely: Inspired Anarchist', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 5 (August 1966), p. 12.

54 Gamboni, Dario. *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 273.

55 Benedictus, Leo. 'Here today, gone tomorrow?', *The Guardian Online*, (9 October 2004) (<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/friezeartfair/story/0,,1320343,00.html>), 27 July 2007.

56 Gamboni, Dario. *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 273.

57 Translation: *Study for an End of the World*.

58 Beerkens, Lydia et al. 'Reconstruction of a Moving Life', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), p. 26.

sculpto-boum!”<sup>59</sup> the piece would be Tinguely's most explosive work to date. It would also be his final auto-destructive piece of this kind.

*Homage to New York* (1960) was Tinguely's first significant destruction piece and serves as the first of several case studies in this paper. This piece, assembled in part from materials collected from various New Jersey dumps, destroyed itself on 17 March, 1960 in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>60</sup> The principle elements of the piece were nearly one hundred wheels, fifteen motors, a piano, an addressograph machine, a baby's bath tub, klaxons, and chemical liquids<sup>61</sup>. The piece also contained metal drums, a large bell, a child's cart, a piece of the American flag, a series of bottles, a fire extinguisher, a meteorological trial balloon, a radio, oil cans, hammers, saws, and other objects. The assemblage was painted white and was driven by fifteen motors.<sup>62</sup> It was destroyed in exactly 28 minutes through fire and collapse, helped by attending firemen acting on the orders of Tinguely and his assistants, Swedish engineer Billy Klüver, and American artist Robert Rauschenberg. MoMA now houses in its permanent collection a piece entitled *Fragment from Homage to New York* (1960), which consists of materials removed from the wreckage following the event, including painted metal, fabric, tape, wood, and rubber tires.

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59 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

60 Fisher, John. 'Destruction as a Mode of Creation', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 8, no. 2 (April 1974), p. 59.

61 Popper, Frank, 'Tinguely: Inspired Anarchist', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 5 (August 1966), p.14.

62 Violand-Hobi, Heidi G. *Jean Tinguely: Life and Work* (NY: Prestel, 1995), p. 36.

**Gustav Metzger's *South Bank Demonstration* and *First Public Demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art* (1960-2006)**

At or around the same time that Tinguely began producing his auto-destructive sculptures, the artist Gustav Metzger (1926-) began producing his first pieces of auto-destructive art.<sup>63</sup> Metzger intended auto-destructive art to be principally realised in public monuments to be erected on civic sites.<sup>64</sup> These structures would contain complex technological and electronic internal devices that would cause the structure to implode and self-destruct within a period of twenty seconds to twenty years.<sup>65</sup> While Metzger only rarely executed his auto-destructive works in performance, his theories were nonetheless influential.<sup>66</sup>

Metzger's auto-destructive works included painting with acid on nylon screens, a process which he first conceived in 1960. Subsequent works by the artist include the projection of images on liquid crystals undergoing a form of perpetual transformation induced by heat, the action of falling bodies such as glass sheets or neon tubes and plastic bags, the dynamics of matter caught and floating in air currents, the use of metals that disintegrate and corrode in the atmosphere, and the presentation of ready-made waste materials found on the street such as cardboard packaging or polythene bags.<sup>67</sup>

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63 Metzger, Gustav. 'Auto-Destructive Art' (1959), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* ed. Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (LA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 401.

64 Stiles, Kristine. 'Thresholds of Control: Destruction Art and Teminal Culture', *Out of Control* (1991): 29-50, (reprinted in *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future, A Survey of Two Decades*, ed. Timothy Druckrey, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), p. 2.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

66 Peterson, Stephen. 'Explosive Proportions: Artists React to the Atomic Age', *Science in Context*, vol. 17, no. 4, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 606.

67 Andrew Wilson in Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art* (London: Coracle, 1996), p. 73.

Perhaps Metzger's most recognised work was his *South Bank Demonstration*, originally produced in 1961. During the demonstration, Metzger, wearing a gas mask as a protective device, sprayed hydrochloric acid onto a series of three stretched sheets of nylon, using acid as a pictorial medium. The acid ate away at the sheets, creating rapidly changing ragged shapes until the support was completely consumed.<sup>68</sup> According to one report, the nylon dissolved within fifteen seconds after contact with the acid.<sup>69</sup>

The *South Bank Demonstration* has been recreated by the artist on several occasions, starting in 1963 for the film, *Auto-Destructive Art – The Activities of G. Metzger*, directed by Harold Liversidge. In 1998 the piece was recreated for the exhibition *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, which opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and toured venues in Vienna, Barcelona, and Tokyo. MOCA curator Paul Schimmel writes that Metzger “re-created the piece in a manner that was consistent with the materials he had formerly used, although the acid was not as strong as the type he had employed previously”.<sup>70</sup> The work was recreated again in London in 2006 for the exhibition, *How to Improve the World: 60 Years of British Art at the Hayward Gallery*, organised by the Arts Council.<sup>71</sup>

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68 Walker, John A. 'Art and Anarchism', *Art and Artists* (May 1978), p. 19.

69 Ferguson, Russell ed. *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, (LA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), p. 273.

70 Schimmel, Paul. 'Intentionality and Performance-Based Art', in *Mortality, Immortality? The Legacy of 20th Century Art* ed. Corzo, Miguel Angel (LA: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), p. 139.

71 Wyver, John. 'Auto-Destructive Art', (26 October 2006) ([http://www.illuminationsmedia.co.uk/newsandblog/blog/index.cfm?start=1&blog\\_id=5](http://www.illuminationsmedia.co.uk/newsandblog/blog/index.cfm?start=1&blog_id=5)) 28 July 2007.

In 2004 Metzger recreated an earlier incarnation of the work for the Tate Gallery. Entitled *Recreation of First Public Demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art*, the piece was based on an acid painting and installation originally produced by Metzger at the Temple Gallery in London in 1960. Gustav Metzger's *South Bank Demonstration* and *First Public Demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art* will form the second case study in this paper.

### **Raphael Montañez Ortiz's 'piano destruction concerts' (1966-2006)**

Latino-American artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz (1934-) has worked in all genres of destruction art, producing recycled films as well as destroyed works in painting, sculpture, installation, and performance.<sup>72</sup> During the 1960s and early 1970s, Ortiz produced a series of 'archaeological finds' in which he peeled away the outer layers of such man-made objects such as mattresses, chairs, sofas, and pianos.<sup>73</sup> These functional domestic objects were destroyed by the artist and rendered useless.<sup>74</sup> The resulting artworks were purchased by collectors and found their way into such major museums as MoMA and the Whitney Museum of American Art.<sup>75</sup>

Ortiz's signature works were his destruction art pieces, created as ritualistic public performance events and often filmed or photographed.<sup>76</sup> In the 1960s Ortiz began to produce a series of piano destruction concerts in which he would physically destroy

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72 Noriega, Chon A. 'Sacred Contingencies: The Digital Deconstructions of Raphael Montanez Ortiz', *Art Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4, (Winter 1995), p. 36.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

74 Aranda-Alvarado, Rocio. *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz*. (NJ: New Jersey: Jersey City Museum, 2007), p. 6.

75 Noriega, Chon A. 'Sacred Contingencies: The Digital Deconstructions of Raphael Montanez Ortiz', *Art Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4, (Winter 1995), p. 36.

76 Genocchio, Benjamin. 'To Be is to Undo', *The New York Times*, (4 March 2007), p. 1.

pianos with the use of an axe. Throughout his career Ortiz staged more than 80 of these events in museums and galleries around the world.<sup>77</sup>

During the Destruction in Art Symposium in London in 1966 Ortiz enacted three such concerts, two which were filmed by the ABC and the BBC, and a third which took place at Duncan Terrace. This is perhaps the most well-known incarnation of the performance entitled *Henny Penny Piano Destruction*.<sup>78</sup> Like Metzger's *South Bank Demonstration*, this piece was later recreated by the artist in 1998 for the exhibition *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*. Similar performances have been recreated at major museums throughout the U.S. In 1996 the piece *Humpty Dumpty: Piano Destruction Concert* was recreated at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where the remains of the work are on display. In 2007, the exhibition entitled *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz* displayed the remains of Ortiz's most recent piano destruction, *Opus 2006*.<sup>79</sup> These works, as a group, will be considered as the third case study in this paper.

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> Aranda-Alvarado, Rocio. *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz*. (NJ: New Jersey: Jersey City Museum, 2007), p. 8.

<sup>79</sup> Genocchio, Benjamin. 'To Be is to Undo', *The New York Times*, (4 March 2007), p. 1.

## **The role of artistic intentionality in the contemporary museum**

During the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a division began to form in the world of aesthetics and art criticism between intentionalism and anti-intentionalism.

Intentionalists argued that artists' personalities, their intellectual approaches, psychological stances, and creative attitudes all affect the disposition of the artworks they create. Awareness of these factors, they argued, shapes our perspective when we wish to make critical or analytic interpretations of works.<sup>80</sup> Anti-intentionalists countered that the relevance of artists' intentions were found only in the artworks themselves, not in the inner workings of the artist's psyche.<sup>81</sup> According to Steven Dykstra in his work on the role of artistic intentionality in fine arts conservation, exhaustive summaries of intentionalist and anti-intentionalist positions have culminated in several core questions: what, if any, is the importance of artists' intent? What can be known with certainty about it? And how do we come to know it?<sup>82</sup>

Today, many museum conservators argue that artists' intentions should be considered as guiding principles for conservation.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the “consideration of contemporary artists' intents for their work and the effect of time on those intents is a part of daily experience within a museum environment”, writes Kimberly Davenport, museum director and former curator of contemporary art at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut.<sup>84</sup> Museums identify intentionality in several ways. “Collect

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80 Dykstra, Steven W. 'The Artist's Intentions and the Intentional Fallacy in Fine Arts Conservation', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, vol. 35, no. 3, article 3 (JAIC 1996), p. 204.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

83 Hummelen, IJsbrand. 'Conservation strategies for modern and contemporary art: recent developments in the Netherlands', *Cr*, issue 3, (2005), p. 24.

84 Davenport, Kimberly. 'Impossible Liberties: Contemporary Artists on the Life of Their Work over Time', *Art Journal* (Summer 1995), p. 40.

and record as much of the following data as possible”, urges the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art in the Netherlands, “artist's comments about the intentions underlying the work...sources such as letters, interviews, notes, texts with notations about the use of materials, the means of presentation, the means of preservation, ideas about restoration and conservation”.<sup>85</sup> If existing sources are limited, often the most straightforward approach is to interview the artist directly, if they are living.

Today, artists are frequently interviewed about their works when these are acquired by museums. The Tate Gallery in London, for instance, has developed a model database for recording information on acquired collections. When possible, the Gallery interviews the artists in front of their acquisitions with a questionnaire tailored to suit each artist and his or her work.<sup>86</sup> Artists interviewed by the Gallery in the past include John Latham, destruction artist and creator of the piece *Skoob Towers*, performed at DIAS in 1966.

In the case of artists no longer living, the issue of intention is more complex. “If they have died there may be others still living who worked with them or who are well acquainted with the artists' intents”, suggests Davenport.<sup>87</sup> Curator D.H. van Wegen writes:

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85 Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. 'The Model for Data Registration,' in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), p. 180.

86 Wharton, Glenn. 'The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art' in *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*. ed. Altshuler, Bruce (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 174.

87 Davenport, Kimberly. 'Impossible Liberties: Contemporary Artists on the Life of Their Work over Time', *Art Journal* (Summer 1995), p. 40.



If the artist is no longer available, a statement about a work - whether made shortly after its inception or later – is often used to solve an unforeseen problem. If an artist has never spoken specifically about the work in question, statements about other works are sought which are then used analogously. If none of these exist, then the artist's 'poetics' can still be extracted from his or her views on art and life in general, followed by an extensive critical interpretation in order to reach a solution for a problem that was unforeseen in this form.<sup>88</sup>

The importance of critical interpretation should be emphasised in reference to artists' writings, for there is a danger that artists' intentions may be misconstrued by an overly literal interpretation of their statements.

While museum professionals may not always choose to act upon artists intentions, particularly if they are not judged to be in the best interests of the museum's collections or those of its visitors, it is clear that an intentionalist reading of artist's statements is relevant to current museum practices. Museum professionals must take many factors into account when collecting and caring for modern and contemporary art, not least what artists themselves have to say about their works. This information is an invaluable resource, particularly when attempting to preserve or interpret artworks of a destructive nature.

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<sup>88</sup> Van Wegen, D.H. 'Between Fetish and Score: The Position of the Curator of Contemporary Art', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), p. 206.

## Artists' sanctions, their legal and moral rights

Artists' communications, statements accompanying artworks, or instructions to conservators and curators about conservation or display conditions establish what Sherri Irvin calls, "the artist's sanction" over certain features of their work".<sup>89</sup>

"Sanction is like a contract", Irwin explains. "[It] is established through the artist's observable actions and communications, though it may in some or even most cases be implicit".<sup>90</sup> Sanction is closely related to the artist's intentions, writes Irvin.

However, the two are not identical. Sanction, writes Irwin, lies in the work's features.<sup>91</sup> It is, therefore, valuable in determining the important features of a work, but does not dictate how a work is to be interpreted.<sup>92</sup>

Irvin cites the case of Liz Magor's *Time and Mrs. Tiber* (1976), a piece acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in 1977 and composed of a collection of jars of preserves in the process of decomposing. Irvin writes:

From the beginning, Magor said that this work is about decay and about our attempts, always doomed, to preserve ourselves and other things against the injurious effects of time. For this reason, she saw the deterioration as part of the work and opposed aggressive or invasive conservation efforts. At one point, she reportedly told conservators that when the work was no longer in exhibitable condition, it should be 'thrown in the garbage.' This sparked a flurry of concern, accompanied by rhetoric about 'the first ever de-

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89 Irvin, Sherri. 'The Artist's Sanction in Contemporary Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 63, no. 4 (Fall 2005), pp. 319-320.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 321.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 321.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 322.

accessioning of a contemporary work of art in the National Gallery's collection'.<sup>93</sup>

Irwin argues that *Time and Mrs. Tiber* violates one of the primary traditional conventions relating object to artwork, namely, the convention that there is a privileged physical state of the object according to which interpretation should proceed.<sup>94</sup> “Our recognition of this state's importance is demonstrated by our practices of conservation and restoration, which”, writes Irwin “are dedicated to maintaining the object in such a state”.<sup>95</sup> However, with Magor's *Time and Mrs. Tiber*, Irwin argues, there is no such privileged state.<sup>96</sup> The museum's staff, therefore, had difficulty in classifying as well as caring for the piece.

“[Magor's] initial view was that the work should be allowed to decay at its own natural pace, with minimal intervention by conservators...An adjunct to this attitude was that the work would eventually 'die', at which point it should leave the realm of art (signified by the museum itself)...”<sup>97</sup> In the end, rather than being discarded, the work was transferred to the museum's Study Collection with Magor's approval. “This way the objects would be preserved within the institution”, writes Irwin, “and scholars...could continue to view and gain knowledge from physical encounter with them”.<sup>98</sup> This outcome was also in line with institutional procedures and desires about the treatment of a deteriorating work.<sup>99</sup> The compromise reached between

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93 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 324.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

Magor and the National Gallery enabled the museum to uphold the artist's intention while minimising the impact on the museum's collecting policy.

“One way for artists to guarantee the integrity of their works is simply to forbid intervention”, writes Catherine Dupree in her article on *Impermanent Art*. When artists feel that their sanctions have been blatantly disregarded they may choose to take legal action to protect their rights. For example, artist Sigurdur Gudmundsson made an agreement with the Amsterdam city council that his sculpture *Wildzang* (1976) should not be maintained, but allowed to slowly deteriorate.<sup>100</sup> “The artist rejects conservation or restoration because deterioration is an essential part of their work”, writes Beunen. “Since this inevitably means the destruction of capital for the owner, it is important that the artist expresses this intention at the time of sale. Furthermore, one may ask whether the case for preservation should not weigh more heavily than the moral rights of the artist where important works of art are concerned”.<sup>101</sup> While such cases rarely make it into the courts, they provoke a multitude of questions regarding artists' legal and moral rights. Thomas K. Dreier writes:

What if the owner – and eventually the public as well - wants to keep unaltered and preserve what the artist intended to change and vanish? Can or do we have to go so far as to say that if change is the artistic intent, then the change forms an integral part of the work and may, therefore, not be stopped, in a case where stopping it would prove to be 'prejudicial to the artist's

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100 Beunen, Annemarie. 'Moral Rights in Modern Art: An International Survey', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), p. 222.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

honor'? Most likely, national courts would be inclined to protect the owner's legitimate interest in preserving the material object of his or her legal right. But where exactly do such ownership interests lie when the purchaser of a work of art knows from the outset that the object acquired was intended not to last?<sup>102</sup>

These are questions which museums should carefully consider before taking the decision to acquire a piece of destruction art.

Research scholar Glenn Wharton of NYU's Institute of Fine Arts and Museum Studies has explored artists' rights in relation to museum practice. The legal rights relevant to conservation, writes Wharton, are artists' "moral rights", as defined in national and international copyright legislation.<sup>103</sup> The European Berne Convention specifically protects artists' rights of "integrity" from any "distortion, mutilation, or other modification" of their work.<sup>104</sup> Conservation intervention, whether through cleaning, repair, or replacing missing elements can be determined to fall into the category of "other modification".<sup>105</sup>

In 1989 the U.S. adopted the Berne Convention, establishing its own Visual Rights Act (VARA) a year later.<sup>106</sup> Through these laws, artists' moral rights are protected

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102 Dreier, Thomas K. 'Copyright Aspects of the Preservation of Nonpermanent Works of Modern Art', in *Mortality, Immortality? The Legacy of 20th Century Art* ed. Corzo, Miguel Angel (LA: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), pp. 65-66.

103 Wharton, Glenn. 'The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art' in *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*. ed. Altshuler, Bruce (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 165.

104 *Ibid.*, p.165.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

106 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

for fifty years following their death in the U.S., seventy years in most of Europe, and indefinitely in France.<sup>107</sup> However, VARA does not consider either conservation or inherent vice to be a destruction, distortion, mutilation, or other modification.<sup>108</sup> A critical difference between U.S. and European legislation, writes Wharton, is that in Europe moral rights legislation protects the artist, whereas in the U.S. it protects the object.<sup>109</sup> The rights of destruction artists under such legislation are largely untested and remain unclear. With the rapidly increasing use of ephemeral materials in contemporary art, it follows that governments will need to formulate new legal rules that focus on the preservation of non-permanent works.<sup>110</sup>

### **Artistic intentionality in destruction art: Case studies**

Destruction art historian Kristine Stiles has stressed that the disappearance of destruction artworks is, in many cases, of vital importance to their creators. “Most importantly, auto-destructive art would disappear...temporal duration...would operate both as a representation and a presentation, an image, an object, and an act of effacement that would oblige reflection on the nature of disappearance”.<sup>111</sup> It is a common misconception, however, that all works of destruction art are intended, necessarily, to disappear. Artistic intentionality is a highly individual matter and must be considered from artist to artist on a work-by-work basis. It is entirely possible, for instance, for two artists to create similar works with vastly different

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107 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

108 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

109 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

110 Dreier, Thomas K. 'Copyright Aspects of the Preservation of Nonpermanent Works of Modern Art', in *Mortality, Immortality? The Legacy of 20th Century Art* ed. Corzo, Miguel Angel (LA: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), p. 66.

111 Stiles, Kristine. 'Survival Ethos and Destruction Art' 78, 81, in Cooke, Miriam. 'Beirut Reborn: The Political Aesthetics of Auto-Destruction', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2002), pp. 393-424.

intentions, or for an artist's intentions to change and alter over time. A brief examination of the career of destruction artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz illustrates the fact that not all destruction art is intended by its maker to disappear.

Since the early 1960s Ortiz has organised the acquisition of many of his works by private collectors and museums including MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York. In 1969 Ortiz was responsible for the founding of a museum of Latin American art, El Museo Del Barrio in New York, of which he was the first director. That Ortiz's works are destructive by nature, in his case, does not mean that he intended them to disappear, or that, in creating these works, he was acting against their preservation. Ortiz's writings, which include his *Destructivism: A Manifesto* (1962),<sup>112</sup> show no evidence of such intentions.

The writings of artist Jean Tinguely provide a contrast to Ortiz's preservationalist philosophy. Tinguely wrote several untitled statements outlining the intentions behind his creations. He was also interviewed on multiple occasions about specific works, including the piece, *Homage to New York*. Tinguely's statements evoke the notion of temporality in his work and a desire for continual change. The following untitled statement was released in 1961, at the height of Tinguely's destructive period:

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112 Ortiz, Raphael Montañez. 'Destructivism: A Manifesto' (1962), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* ed. Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (LA: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 722-723.

Immobile, certain, and permanent things, ideas, works and beliefs change, transform, and disintegrate...Movement is the only static, final, permanent, and certain thing. Static means transformation...Do not hold on to anything...Do not pinpoint anything!...We are fooling ourselves if we close our eyes and refuse to recognize the change...Decomposition begins only when we try to prevent it...We would so much like to own, think, or be something static, eternal, and permanent. However, our only eternal possession will be change...To attempt to hold fast an instant is doubtful...How beautiful it is to be transitory. How lovely it is not to have to live forever.<sup>113</sup>

While this statement shows evidence of what van Wegen dubs the artist's "poetics",<sup>114</sup> it would be difficult to argue that such broad, philosophical statements determine Tinguely's intentions against the preservation of his works. When taken together with more explicit declarations expressed later in his life, however, these passages succeed in giving us an informed understanding of the artist's views on preservation.

In a filmed interview in 1981, Tinguely expressed his reasons for producing *Homage to New York* at MoMA, explaining "I needed to do it there, I wanted to do it there. It's a kind of temple; what the Vatican is to God, the MoMA is to art. It is an official

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113 Tinguely, Jean. 'Untitled Statement' (1961), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* ed. Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (LA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 405.

114 Van Wegen, D.H. 'Between Fetish and Score: The Position of the Curator of Contemporary Art', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), p. 206.



place of art. I was against that”.<sup>115</sup> According to Tinguely's biographer, Heidi Violand-Hobi, Tinguely saw museums as sterile domains that fix art in a vacuum and wanted to make a statement against what he called “recuperation”.<sup>116</sup> His statement, therefore, may be construed as challenging the role of the museum which preserves his work.

Speaking again of *Homage to New York* in a radio interview in 1982, Tinguely made the following brief statement:

I wanted something ephemeral, that would pass like a falling star and, most importantly, that would be impossible for museums to reabsorb. I didn't want it to be 'museumised'. The work had to pass by, make people dream and talk, and that would be all, the next day nothing would be left, everything would go back to the garbage bins.<sup>117</sup>

This statement, although obtained several years after the creation of the work, clearly defines the artist's intentions behind its creation. That MoMA continues to preserve and display remnants of this work, in spite of such statements, highlights the fact that museums are under multiple pressures to balance the respect of artist's intentions with the preservation and interpretation of works for future audiences. Whatever the artist's intention, museums must make deliberated and informed decisions based on their responsibilities not only to the artists they collect, but also to present and future audiences, for whom they must make efforts to preserve the works held in their care.

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115 Violand-Hobi, Heidi G. *Jean Tinguely: Life and Work* (NY: Prestel, 1995), p. 36.

116 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Auto-destructive artist Gustav Metzger has expressed similar anti-museum sentiments in his writings. While Metzger's writings, primarily embodied by a series of four manifestos released from 1959 to 1962, are more clearly structured than Tinguely's, his statements are of a more generalised nature, rarely referring to individual works. In his *Manifesto World* of 1962 Metzger writes of his fellow auto-destructive artists, "We take art out of art galleries and museums. The artist must destroy art galleries. Capitalist institutions. Boxes of deceit".<sup>118</sup> To further highlight his opposition to museums and galleries, Metzger called for an art strike to take place between the years 1977 and 1980, writing that "the years without art will see the collapse of many private galleries. Museums and cultural institutions handling contemporary art will be severely hit, suffer loss of funds, and will have to reduce their staff".<sup>119</sup> It is difficult to imagine a more personal attack on the museum.

In his first manifesto, entitled *Auto-Destructive Art*, released in 1959, Metzger wrote that "auto-destructive paintings, sculptures and constructions have a lifetime varying from a few moments to twenty years. When the disintegrative process is complete the work is to be removed from the site and scrapped".<sup>120</sup> While it might be difficult to imagine museum staff taking this advice literally and disposing of an accessioned work in this way, such actions are in no way unprecedented. A case in point is

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118 Metzger, Gustav 'Manifesto World' (1962) in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* ed. Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (LA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 403.

119 Metzger, Gustav. 'Art Into Society, Society Into Art' 79, in Morris, Simon et al. *Interpretation Vol. 2: Artists / Writers*. (Manchester: Information as Material, 2002), p. 23.

120 Metzger, Gustav. 'Auto-Destructive Art' (1959), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* ed. Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (LA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 401.

Metzger's *Recreation of First Public Demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art* at the Tate Gallery, an intrinsic part of which, being mistaken for rubbish, was removed by one of the Gallery's cleaners and thrown out with the rest of the rubbish in June 2004.<sup>121</sup> Was the employee acting upon the artist's original intentions or merely exercising her own aesthetic judgement?

In a recent interview conducted by British journal *Art Monthly*, Metzger said of his work, "The acid paintings were a form of performance, and were never meant to be preserved".<sup>122</sup> Yet museums, including MOCA and the Tate Gallery, continue to collect and display Metzger's acid paintings with the artist's acknowledgment and participation; proof that artists' intentions may alter over time. This brings up a valid question: should museums preserve artworks according to the original intentions of their makers, or revise their aims to fit artists' changing views? While adherence to the artist's original intentions would seem preferable in most cases, if the artist later decides to take measures to preserve a work originally intended for destruction, should the museum refuse these actions in an attempt to avoid artist interference? In this relatively unexplored area of museum ethics there are no clear guidelines.

Although conceived as performance pieces, the results of Metzger's works are often displayed in the context of physical objects. At the Tate Gallery, for instance, portions of Metzger's *Recreation of First Public Demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art* are mounted on the wall in a manner evoking a traditional oil painting. Excerpts

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121 Anon. 'Cleaner bins rubbish bag artwork', BBC News Online, (27 August 2004) (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/3604278.stm>), 27 July 2007.

122 Metzger, Gustav and Wilson, Andrew. 'A Terrible Beauty', *Art Monthly*, no. 222 (December 1998 - January 1999), 7-11.

from Metzger's writings outline significant variations in form, making it difficult to define the exact nature of his works:

Auto-destructive art can be presented in the form of the demonstration or the more permanent work. A demonstration takes place before an audience. It may last a few minutes or as long as one day. The more permanent works can go into museums, places on open sites or in buildings. I am more interested in the more permanent forms of auto-destructive art.<sup>123</sup>

With the phrase, “the more permanent forms of auto-destructive art”, Metzger sums up the temporal conflict inherent in many destruction artworks. Metzger's distinction between demonstration and permanence leads us to examine the boundaries between object-based and performance art and how these are defined by artists and museums.

### **The role of the object in the contemporary museum**

Museums and artists often have very different ways of thinking about artworks.

There is evidence that all three of the artists featured in the case studies have considered their works primarily as event-structured performance pieces. Yet when the materials resulting from these performances have been collected by museums, they have been classified and displayed in the context of sculptural objects and/or paintings. Distinctions in the way artworks are defined are heavily influenced by the context in which they are presented. The contextual boundaries of the art museum are defined through a tradition of object-oriented display.

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<sup>123</sup> Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art* (London: Coracle, 1996), p. 45.

Museums construct meaning through the processes of collection and interpretation. Objects are given aesthetic and art historical value through their relation to artists, events, actions and other forms of association. In this way physical objects with little or no intrinsic value, such as Metzger's 'bag of rubbish', are given meaning. In the case of Tinguely's *Homage to New York*, one author describes the debris left behind as “meaningless”<sup>124</sup> Yet, having been collected and interpreted by the museum, this debris is presented to the visitor as a meaningful embodiment of the artwork.

The museological process of interpretation has long centered upon the physical object. “Standards and practices in the museum field were developed in a context that viewed the art object itself as the primary record of the creative act and as an embodiment of the artist's concept”, writes arts sociologist, Jan Marontate.<sup>125</sup>

“Respect for the integrity of the original work as an object of material culture was a central tenet in establishing authenticity”.<sup>126</sup> For most museum professionals, the physical object has remained the focal point of artworks throughout the twentieth century.<sup>127</sup> Marontate writes that “a reverence for the art object in its original state is enshrined in codes of professional ethics established by associations of museum and conservation professionals (such as ICOM or the American Institute for Conservation of Historical and Artistic Works)”.<sup>128</sup> Acknowledgment of the object as the authentic product of artistic output has engendered many practices, which as

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124 Fisher, John. 'Destruction as a Mode of Creation', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 8, no. 2 (April 1974), p. 59.

125 Marontate, Jan. 'Rethinking Permanence and Change in Contemporary Cultural Preservation Strategies', *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, vol. 34, no. 4, (Winter 2005), p. 301.

126 *Ibid.*, p. 286.

127 *Ibid.*, p. 290.

128 *Ibid.*, p. 290.

Marontate writes, “are no longer relevant to new forms of artistic creation”.<sup>129</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, artists began deliberately challenging the primacy of the object as a record of artistic activity.<sup>130</sup> Marontate cites the examples of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) and Arman's videotaped destruction of a room in a work known as *Conscious Vandalism* (1975), claiming that “the artists purportedly destroyed an object of art, but in fact left physical remains of the objects to be preserved and displayed by museum professionals”.<sup>131</sup> Some authors argue that such works should not be preserved by museums. “The installations were made in the sixties and seventies as a conscious reaction to the object-oriented art world”, writes art historian de Leeuw. “They should not be treated as ready-made art works, lodged in museums and preserved”.<sup>132</sup>

Pip Laurenson, Head of Time-based Media Conservation at the Tate Gallery, writes that in spite of the dematerialisation of the art object in the 1960s and the exploration of the idea of artworks as clusters of meanings in contemporary conservation theory, such works are still commonly conceived as unique physical objects.<sup>133</sup> Laurenson writes:

In conservation the prevalent notion of authenticity is based on physical integrity and this generally guides judgments about loss. For the majority of traditional art objects, minimising change to the physical work means

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129 *Ibid.*, p. 301.

130 *Ibid.*, p. 291.

131 *Ibid.*, p. 291.

132 De Leeuw, Riet. 'The Precarious Reconstruction of Installations', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), p. 221.

133 Laurenson, Pip. 'Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations,' *Tate Papers*, (Autumn 2006)

(<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06autumn/laurenson.htm>), 27 July 2007.

minimising loss, where loss is understood as compromising the (physical) integrity of a unique object.<sup>134</sup>

In the case of destructive or ephemeral works, however, minimising loss may not be possible or even desirable.

How, then, does the museum, “through its curatorial voice, address the significance of an ephemeral art without reducing the art to its artifacts: props, photographs, videos, sets, costumes?” asks multimedia artist, Michael Rush.<sup>135</sup> Do these objects really constitute the 'artwork', or are they, as some authors have put it, merely “relics”?<sup>136</sup> Whatever one's viewpoint, museums require the use of artifacts to interpret works of artistic creation. Museums collect and interpret objects and related materials, not out of a necessity to define the boundaries of the artwork or ideas of what constitutes art, but as interpretive tools used to communicate with their visitors. Misconceptions arise from traditional associations embodied by the use of material culture in the object-centered process of authentication.

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134 *Ibid.*

135 Rush, Michael. 'A Noisy Silence', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 21, no. 1 (January 1999), p. 2.

136 Lachance, Michaël. 'Le musée incendié', *Cahiers des arts visuels*, vol. 9, no. 36. (Winter 1987), p. 39.

## Aspects of performance in destruction art

Artists, by nature, approach their works in an entirely different manner from museums, in which the object appears as a means of expression or, in the case of performance art, as a tool used in creating a piece. “By ascribing privilege to presentation over re-presentation”, writes Stiles, “artists creating event-structured art manifested content in 'process' rather than in objects-in-themselves”.<sup>137</sup> “Artists didn't create performances with a mind toward the object”, writes Rush. “The objects existed in the service of the performance”.<sup>138</sup> While many auto-destructive artworks of the 1960s contained elements of performance, can these artworks, as a group, be considered performances? John Fisher writes:

Temporality is basic to the consideration of creativity in a destructive act...But temporality in art takes us back again to performance, and auto-destructive art is unlike the performing arts in several significant ways. First, repetition is impossible. If a repeat performance is attempted with a similar object, it will destruct differently. There is no functional aspect which will make another performance meaningful...Second, an object is destroyed. There is a nonaesthetic residue after the event, but this cannot be identified with the art object. There is an objective before and after...Third, in the performance itself the human presence is lacking...Electrical and chemical forces, gravity, and fire perform. Even in painting with acid the performance begins after the brushwork is completed.<sup>139</sup>

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137 Stiles, Kristine. *The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Cultural Project of Event-Structured Live Art*, PhD Dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), p. 653.

138 Rush, Michael. 'A Noisy Silence', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 21, no. 1 (January 1999), p. 7.

139 Fisher, John. 'Destruction as a Mode of Creation', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 8, no. 2



Many destruction artworks do not fit easily into object or performance categories, a fact which makes them inherently difficult to classify. “For the artist, the painting or sculpture had also to become something that was experienced, become, in fact, an *event*”, writes Kenneth Coutts-Smith in an article on destruction art, published in 1966. “Aesthetic experience is now a matter of participation, a three-way dialogic situation actually taking place in space and time between the artist, the spectator, and the object”.<sup>140</sup> Stiles calls this form of art “viewer inclusive” or “event-structured live art”.<sup>141</sup> In auto-destructive art of the 1960s, the object is commonly considered as part of an overall event, which includes the artist, his or her actions, and his or her audience. As we have seen, museums have traditionally placed the greatest significance on the object. However, preserving the object alone is not enough accurately to recreate the experience of the work. The sights, sounds, actions, and surroundings of the event must be captured and presented together with the object in order to recreate the experience as nearly as possible. This can be achieved, in part, through the creative use of documentation.

Detroit's Museum of New Art (MONA) recently embraced the live event aspect of destruction art in an exhibition entitled, *KaBOOM!* Dubbed “a night of creative destruction in Detroit”, the exhibition featured audience interaction in the destruction of 100 reproductions including Man Rays *Object to be Destroyed* and Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.<sup>142</sup> Through the creative use of

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(April 1974), p. 61.

140 Coutts-Smith, Kenneth. 'Violence in Art', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 5 (August 1966), p. 5.

141 Stiles, Kristine. *The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Cultural Project of Event-Structured Live Art*, PhD Dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), pp. 665; 1.

142 Bourgeau, Jeff. *Art Damage: A Night of Creative Destruction in Detroit*, (Detroit: The Museum

reproductions and audience participation, the *KaBOOM!* exhibition showed how destruction art may be incorporated into a museum's programmes while addressing matters of change and permanence.

### **The role of documentation in destruction art: Case studies**

Art historian Dario Gamboni argues that, while other similar works have long since disappeared, Tinguely's *Homage to New York* has kept its place in the collective art-historical memory due to photographic documents, recollections, mentions and comments.<sup>143</sup> Documentation, by the artist, the museum and third parties is of vital importance to the preservation and interpretation of destruction artworks. Without documentary evidence of artistic events and actions, destruction artworks risk losing the meanings intended by their creators. Yet documentation of destruction art is, itself, problematic, as it can prolong the life of an artwork beyond the limits intended by the artist.

There are two films in existence which record the self-destruction of Tinguely's *Homage to New York*. The first, by Tinguely's collaborator and fellow artist, Robert Breer is entitled *Homage to Jean Tinguely's Homage to New York* (1960). At nine and a half minutes long it cannot be said to be an accurate representation of the event which lasted a total of 28 minutes. Fisher describes the film as “an attempt at serious contemporary film-making, using techniques of animation, multiple exposures, single frame shots, and other elements of creative cinematography, but it is not a

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of New Art, 19 October 2005) ([http://www.detroitmona.com/jef\\_bourgeau\\_kaBOOM!.htm](http://www.detroitmona.com/jef_bourgeau_kaBOOM!.htm)), 13 November 2006.

143 Gamboni, Dario. *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 273.

record of the event”.<sup>144</sup> As the film is considered to have an aesthetic quality unrelated to the original artwork, it cannot therefore represent the impartial reality of the piece as a documentary commissioned by the museum would aim to achieve.

The second film, entitled *Breaking It Up at the Museum* (1960), directed by D. A. Pennebaker is of a similar length, lasting a mere eight minutes. This film, writes Fisher, “is more of a documentary, with shots of the sculpture in action, sandwiched between...an interview with Tinguely and a post mortem with some spectators”.<sup>145</sup> As Pennebaker is recognised as a documentary film maker, this film, recently screened by MoMA's Department of Film and Media, could perhaps be considered as a more impartial portrayal of the event. While the film may document a portion of the artistic event, it cannot be said to represent the piece in its entirety any more than the fragments collected by MoMA. Fisher writes, “in spite of the insistence of some people that the film is all important in destructive sculpture, I find no evidence that the permanent record in the motion picture is at all construed as the determinate creative act in this case”.<sup>146</sup>

Film did, however, play an intrinsic role in Tinguely's final destructive work of its kind, *End of the World No. 2* (1962), which was filmed in the Nevada desert by American television network, NBC, and planned for telecast on an episode of the popular news program, *David Brinkley's Journal*. This work, writes curator Anna Artaker, is not conceived for viewers but is meant to be recorded cinematically and

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144 Fisher, John. 'Destruction as a Mode of Creation', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 8, no. 2 (April 1974), p. 60.

145 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

146 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

photographically.<sup>147</sup> Art historian, Stephen Petersen, argues that “American television offered Tinguely the prospect of an uncommonly large and safely distant group of viewers. Television cameras were set up to record the entire sequence of operations and explosions”.<sup>148</sup> In the space of two years, Tinguely had “literally moved his exhibition venue from an art museum to the desert, and to a slot on American network television”.<sup>149</sup> Documentation had, in effect, become part and parcel of the artistic process.

Ortiz's destruction events were similarly filmed by major television networks. During the course of the DIAS symposium Ortiz performed a series of seven public destruction events, including his piano destruction concerts, the first of which was performed at the request of the BBC.<sup>150</sup> Subsequently, Ortiz was invited to perform his piano destruction concert on Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show* on prime-time television.<sup>151</sup> Film remained an intrinsic part of Ortiz's work throughout his career, particularly in his recycled films of the late 1950s and his video deconstructions of the 1980s.<sup>152</sup> Today, video footage of Ortiz's piece, *Humpty Dumpty: Piano Destruction Concert* is displayed alongside remnants of the work at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Similarly, archival photographs of Ortiz's performance works from the 1960s through the 1990s have been reproduced to accompany

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147 Artaker, Anna. 'Chronology', in *Gustav Metzger: History History* ed. Breitwieser, Sabine (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2005), p. 118.

148 Peterson, Stephen. 'Explosive Proportions: Artists React to the Atomic Age', *Science in Context*, vol. 17, no. 4, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 605.

149 *Ibid.*, p. 605.

150 Raine, Lauren and Ortiz, Raphael Montañez. *Physio-Psycho-Alchemy: The Art of Raphael Montañez Ortiz* (August 1988) (<http://www.rainewalker.com/raphaelortiz.htm>), 27 July 2007.

151 Kimmelman, Michael. 'The Return of the Well-Trampled Clavier', *The New York Times*, (1 March 1997).

152 Noriega, Chon A. 'Sacred Contingencies: The Digital Deconstructions of Raphael Montanez Ortiz', *Art Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4, (Winter 1995), pp. 37-38.

physical objects at Jersey City Museum's 2007 exhibition, *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz*.<sup>153</sup> These photographs and footage assist curators in the interpretation of Ortiz's work, placing the objects in the context of the artist's actions.

In 1963 Metzger recreated his South Bank Demonstration specifically for the film, *Auto-Destructive Art – The Activities of G. Metzger*, directed by Harold Liversidge. The film consists of Metzger reading his second manifesto from off-camera, followed by painting action in which the artist works on a large screen with brushes and spray equipment.<sup>154</sup> According to Metzger scholar Justin Hoffmann, the artist saw film as a means for propagating his ideas.<sup>155</sup> Metzger has shown increasing interest in the use of documentary photographs in recent artistic activities, which have included a series of *Historic Photographs* enlarged and presented in installations. In these works, writes critic Alison Jones, “the event is taken out of the context from which it takes its meaning...what we are actually brought closer to is the event's reproduction. What we are brought closer to is different from the event in itself”.<sup>156</sup> The distancing effect of documentation has been remarked upon by other destruction artists, including Al Hansen, who writes that “a weak facet of destruction art is when it gets to be a record of what happened. The product must surmount the process. With a good piece of art it doesn't matter what camera took the picture or who did it”.<sup>157</sup>

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153 Grzesiak, Marion. 'The Meaning of Unmaking', *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz* (NJ: Jersey City Museum, 2007), p. 4.

154 Hoffmann, Joseph. 'The Invention of Auto-Destructive Art', in *Gustav Metzger: History History* ed. Breitwieser, Sabine (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2005), p. 27.

155 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

156 Jones, Alison. 'Introduction to the Historic Photographs of Gustav Metzger,' *Forum for Holocaust Studies* (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/forum-for-holocaust-studies/metzger.html>) 24 August 2007.

157 Hansen, Al. 'Life in Destruction', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 5 (August 1966), p. 33.

Documentary photography played a different role during one DIAS event, where photographs acted as evidence in an obscenity trial against destruction artists Gustav Metzger and John Sharkey. Kristine Stiles, in her PhD dissertation on DIAS, gives an account of the trial, in which photographs were used as the determining feature in proving the artists' intents:

Regardless of the fact that the photographs were re-presentations of a past action, they were presented to and understood by the jury as the primary account and record of the original event. Much testimony on behalf of the defendants pointed out that the photographs dramatically altered the context and feeling of the performance since they isolated the various actions and images from their original continuity, simultaneity, and kinesthetic sequence in the event...It is well-known that photographs distort and misrepresent information, that they are not images of reality any more than reality may be perceived as a static object for contemplation. Yet, again and again, images are taken for reality, become proof of substance. The DIAS trial raised the question seldom asked of such photographs: With whom rests the responsibility for interpretation of the artistic intent and content of an action mediated by a photograph – the artist, the photographer, the sponsors of the exhibition, the viewer?<sup>158</sup>

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158 Stiles, Kristine. *The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Cultural Project of Event-Structured Live Art*, PhD Dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), p. 638.

The employment of photographs as evidence in the DIAS trial serves to contrast the artists' emphasis on the primacy of their actions, acting as a microcosm for the wider conflicts involved in documenting destruction art.

In the case of ephemeral or destructive artworks, photographs, and other forms of documentation may occasionally act to undermine the artist's intentions. A case in point is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, a piece of 'earth art' created in 1970 out of mud and rocks in Utah's Great Salt Lake, which disappeared just two years after its creation, leaving behind only photographic and video evidence.<sup>159</sup> Because of the object's disappearance, the related documentation took on increasing importance, finally rivaling the original artifact as the recognised art form. "For Smithson the photographs and film were pieces of evidence and initially these were sold via his gallery", writes de Leeuw. "However, when he realised that this material was regarded as the final art work, he put a stop to their purchase. The documentation then acquired an ambiguous status, halfway between the art work and the reference to it".<sup>160</sup> Clark Lunberry, in his article on *Spiral Jetty* argues that the documentation of this piece, rather than supporting the artist's intentions, in fact served to subvert them by creating a lasting vision of an event which the artist had intended to disappear.<sup>161</sup> Similar arguments could be made for many destruction artworks now preserved in documentation form alone.

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159 Lunberry, Clark. 'Quiet Catastrophe: Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, Vanished,' *Discourse*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Spring 2002), p. 92.

160 De Leeuw, Riet. 'The Precarious Reconstruction of Installations', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), p. 219.

161 Lunberry, Clark. 'Quiet Catastrophe: Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, Vanished,' *Discourse*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Spring 2002), p. 100.

## Artist and museum-initiated documentation strategies

Despite the potential conflict between documentation and destruction art, many destruction artists embrace documentation as an essential part of their work, allowing them to reach audiences who would otherwise be unable to experience their creations. The exhibition, *That Was Then and This is Now: Interventions, installations, and performance art documented*, which took place at Harvard University's Center for Government and International Studies in April 2007, explored the uses of documentation of transient art in an exhibition setting. The exhibition's curator, Alexandra M. Hays, says:

Through documentation, we can rethink these works or revisit and appreciate the work that went into realizing them rather than a painting which is painted and then continually exhibited. These works, if they're not documented, then they'll never be seen again.<sup>162</sup>

“It's really exciting for me to have the opportunity to show the piece after it self-destructed”, says artist Enzo A. Camacho, who contributed a destructive work to the exhibition.<sup>163</sup>

Recent initiatives show ephemeral and destruction artists giving increasing thought to how their works are documented. The School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, for instance, offers a course for art students entitled *The Desire for Evidence: Documenting the Ephemeral*. The course description explains:

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<sup>162</sup> Alexandra M. Hays in Crown, Michelle. 'That Was Then: Documenting Transient Art', *The Harvard Crimson*, (27 April 2007) (<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=518592>), 27 July 2007.

<sup>163</sup> Enzo A. Camacho in *Ibid*.



Working in ephemeral medium creates its own dilemmas. Once a performance or an installation is finished, nothing remains, and the sense of loss can be profound. The purist allows the work to exist for the moment, recorded only in memory. Others want to retain some vestige of the work, either to remind them of what they have done, or to use more practically in applications to present elsewhere.<sup>164</sup>

Course instructor and ephemeral artist Marilyn Arsem writes:

We talk about the difference between relics and records...We talk about the differences between creating documentation of work to use for grant applications and making a record of the work, and creating a document that conveys the spirit of the work and in fact might be considered another work of art.<sup>165</sup>

Museums, too, are spending increasing resources on documentation strategies for their collections. “The deliberate deterioration of some contemporary works forces museums to reconsider their preservation doctrine”, writes Wharton. “In some cases images that record the demise of original materials are preserved rather than the object itself”.<sup>166</sup> For museums, building collections is one step in providing an

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164 Anon. 'The Desire for Evidence: Documenting the Ephemeral,' Course Description, (Boston: School of the Museum of Fine Arts, 2007) ([http://www.smfa.edu/Programs\\_Faculty/Program\\_Areas\\_of\\_Study/Day/Performance.asp](http://www.smfa.edu/Programs_Faculty/Program_Areas_of_Study/Day/Performance.asp)), 28 July 2007.

165 Arsem, Marilyn. E-mail to the author, 7 August 2007.

166 Wharton, Glenn. 'The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art' in *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*. ed. Altshuler, Bruce (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

historical record of ephemeral art forms. Ideally, writes MoMA's Anne Britton, acquisition, preservation, and documentation parameters should be linked in a museum's collecting policy.<sup>167</sup> Britton suggests a range of media choices, which might include paper, audiotape, videotape, film, microforms, photographic prints, and slides, digital media and artifacts in any number of media.<sup>168</sup> “While ephemeral art is by definition transitory”, writes Britton, “the documentation of such art must not be”.<sup>169</sup>

The tendency towards the ephemeral in contemporary art has also meant shifting responsibilities for museum conservators as contemporary conservation has taken on a larger role in the documentation and storage of artworks.<sup>170</sup> “[The conservator's] job traditionally involved a physical object and keeping this object in its original state for as long as possible”, writes Olivia Poloni. “Now their job largely incorporates the physicality of the documentation that accompanies the contemporary work of art which can hold the utmost importance over the object; so the idea stays alive for generations to come, and perhaps not the physical object”.<sup>171</sup>

Jean Tinguely's *The Sorceress* (1961) is an excellent example of a museum-based initiative to document a work of destruction art. The sculpture, produced by the artist at the height of his destructive period, was acquired by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in 1988. The work is composed of a series of elements including

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2005), p. 172.

167 Anne Britton in Zielinski, Henrietta et al. Panel Session 2: Should a Moment Last Forever? (Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 5 April 1997) (<http://www.arlisna.org/news/conferences/1997/proceedings/moment.html>) 28 July 2007, p. 5.

168 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

169 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

170 Poloni, Olivia. *Life doesn't last, art doesn't last, it doesn't matter* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, October 2005) (<http://www.incca.org/>), 28 July 2007, p. 2.

171 *Ibid.*, p. 2

welded, painted, chromed, galvanised & rusted iron & steel with aluminum, glazed ceramic, copper, hemp, cotton twine, galvanised wire, springs, electrical wire, and rubber, powered by an electric motor. Like many of Tinguely's pieces of this period, this work was intended to self destruct through collapse. Through video and stop-action photography, staff at the Hirshhorn were able to document the piece in motion, as the artist originally intended.

In an internal e-mail to the Museum's conservation and photography departments, curator Valerie Fletcher writes:

The sculpture wants to self-destruct, so our goal is to keep the sculpture in motion as long as possible, and to capture on film if a piece does go flying off...This photography is two-fold in purpose: to document the sculpture as thoroughly as possible and to enhance the display of it in our galleries. Before putting the sculpture in motion for filming, the sculpture should be well-documented with photos or slides showing the various elements in their current condition...These pictures are a back-up so if *Sorceress* does lose her bits and pieces we will have visual evidence for restoration.<sup>172</sup>

An account of the documentation session is given in the work's conservation report:

The sculpture was recently run, just prior to writing this report, for an extended period of time (3 to 4 minutes) to photo-document the movement

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<sup>172</sup> Fletcher, Valerie, Curator of Modern Sculpture, Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden. E-mail to HMSG's conservation and photography departments, (Washington D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, 15 April 2003).

and partial disassembly of the sculpture. During the operation of the sculpture a number of elements were completely cast off or partially dislodged from the piece. Although it is the intention of the artist to have the sculpture ultimately self-destruct, it is a curatorial decision (Valerie Fletcher, Sculpture Curator, HMSG) to re-attach all dislocated elements, as best as possible, as they existed prior to this most recent activation of the sculpture. Re-attaching the elements will be done in such manner, that some materials used to attach the elements may be visible after attachment. It will not be the intention of the restoration to necessarily give the illusion that the element never separated from the sculpture.<sup>173</sup>

“My decision was based on the artist's own practices and intentions, as implemented at the Tinguely Museum in Basel, Switzerland”, explains Fletcher.<sup>174</sup> “Watching the sculpture start to self-destruct while it was being filmed was indeed a nerve-wracking experience”, admits Fletcher in a later memo, “but precisely what the artist expected”.<sup>175</sup> The Hirshhorn's documentation initiative shows that, through careful research and planning, it is possible to achieve an effective compromise between the intention of the artist and the aims of the museum.

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173 Aks, Lee, Sculpture Conservator, Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden. Conservation Report for *The Sorceress* by Jean Tinguely, (Washington D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, 1 May 2003), p. 1.

174 Fletcher, Valerie, Curator of Modern Sculpture, Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden. Addendum to Aks, Lee. Conservation Report for *The Sorceress* by Jean Tinguely, (Washington D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, 7 May 2003).

175 Fletcher, Valerie, Curator of Modern Sculpture, Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden. Memorandum to HMSG's conservation department, (Washington D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, 23 April 2003).

## **Destructive materials and techniques**

“In order to understand ephemerality”, writes art historian Mary O'Neill, “it is necessary to understand our attachment to the opposite – permanence – and its function not only in art, but in Western culture generally, which requires visual art to be both physically durable and collectible”.<sup>176</sup> Such considerations are implicit in the museum-sanctioned role of preservation. O'Neill writes:

Given the pressure from the art institutions, who, in their governing rules are obliged to acquire works that are preservable and can be passed on to future generations, and given the common assumptions about the need for a body of work to build an artistic career and reputation, why would an artist make ephemeral work?<sup>177</sup>

“Part of the motivation”, argues O'Neill, “may be a desire to democratize or challenge art museums”.<sup>178</sup> This motivation is certainly evident in the writings of destruction artists, such as Gustav Metzger. “The artist does not want to give the work to a society as foul as this one”, writes Metzger, “so auto-destructive art becomes a kind of boycott. The artist refuses to embody his finest values in permanent works – to be bought, enjoyed, and appropriated by the class whom he detests”.<sup>179</sup> Part of the artist's challenge lies in the materials and techniques he or she uses in his or her art.

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176 O'Neil, Mary. 'Ephemeral Art: Memory and Loss,' *Im/Permanence: Cultures in and out of Time* (Pittsburgh: Center for the Arts in Society, Carnegie Mellon University, 2005), p. 1.

177 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

178 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

179 Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art* (London: Coracle, 1996), p. 49.

When faced with the task of preserving destruction artworks, museum conservators truly have their work cut out. The materials and techniques used by destruction artists of the 1960s foreshadowed those used today by many contemporary artists. In some cases, these materials and techniques represent a fundamental opposition to methods of preventative and remedial conservation. Fugitive or transient materials, common aspects of destruction art, are, today, a major issue for conservators, as are problems of 'inherent vice', defined as "the built-in tendency to self-destruct".<sup>180</sup>

In the domain of artistic materials, destruction art has much in common with other forms of ephemeral art. "There are forms of auto-destructive art where the artist has a tight control over the nature and timing of the disintegrative process", writes Gustav Metzger, "and there are other forms where the artist's control is slight".<sup>181</sup> Metzger differentiates between manipulation (actively destructive) and passive techniques, such as those used in ephemeral art, whereby the artist lets the nature of the materials take its course. Metzger has called his own art "material/transforming art",<sup>182</sup> placing an emphasis on the transformation processes inherent in the materials he chooses.

In a list which reads like a conservator's nightmare, Metzger outlines some of the materials and processes used in creating auto-destructive art:

"Acid...Ballistics...Compression, Combustion, Corrosion...Drop...Electricity...

Explosives...Heat, Human Energy...Natural Forces, Nuclear Energy...Pressure,

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180 Adams, Lorraine. 'How Degrading! Contemporary Art and the Ravages of Age', The Washington Post, Sunday Arts Section, (12 January 2003), p. G01.

181 Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art* (London: Coracle, 1996), p. 60.

182 Stiles, Kristine. *The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Cultural Project of Event-Structured Live Art*, PhD Dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), p. 646.

Radiation...Steam, Stress...Vibration, [and] Water...”<sup>183</sup> Stiles supplements this list with her own account of techniques used in auto-destructive art, including “explosions, burning, tearing, axing, and cutting...wind, fire, rain, water and gravity”.<sup>184</sup> These lists incorporate processes such as “corrosion”, “heat” and “stress, which conservators are trained to treat and prevent. With the advent of auto-destructive art in the 1960s, these 'hazards' became potentially intrinsic parts of the artwork.

In a description of auto-destructive processes, Metzger writes, “forms implode. Matter is carbonized and pulverized”.<sup>185</sup> “Most of these transformations are visible...[However]...in auto-destructive art a great deal of activity takes place on the microscopic level and it is not seen. This invisible activity *is a part* of the artist's statement”.<sup>186</sup> That invisible attributes may be considered intentional parts of an artwork presents obvious difficulties for the conservator. As neither artist nor conservator can accurately predict when and where biological change will occur, it is unclear what measures, if any, can be taken to prevent unwanted change. As Hoffmann writes, the element of chance is an intended part of Metzger's work. “The final form is shaped by a chemical or physical process that is not completely determinable”.<sup>187</sup>

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183 Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art* (London: Coracle, 1996), p. 60.

184 Stiles, Kristine. 'The Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium and the “DIAS Affect”', in *Gustav Metzger: History History* ed. Breitwieser, Sabine (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2005), p. 42.

185 Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art* (London: Coracle, 1996), p. 43.

186 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

187 Hoffmann, Joseph. 'The Invention of Auto-Destructive Art', in *Gustav Metzger: History History* ed. Breitwieser, Sabine (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2005), p. 27.

According to Metzger, “the time/material/process factor...decomposition, dematerialisation...[and] irreversible processes” are all part of auto-destructive art.<sup>188</sup> “Auto-destructive art uses energy as the central concept as well as technique of a work. As auto-destructive art is disintegrating and materializing, complex time structures are *built-in* features of the art”.<sup>189</sup> Conservators actively treat processes of decomposition, dematerialisation and avoid irreversible processes when caring for artworks. In his statements, Metzger reveals, not only that these processes are intended parts of his work, but also that they are, in fact, ongoing. “Auto-destructive art is *material* that is undergoing a *process* of transformation in *time*. In designing a work the artist sees these three factors as *one*”.<sup>190</sup> In other words, aging and decomposition are an integral part of the work, which should not be prevented, treated or even mitigated, as one might attempt through the use of preventative conservation.

“Destruction and chemical change happen everywhere at all times and to everything”, writes poet Dom Sylvester Houédard. “To accelerate the process is only to increase the degree of violence – rather than to disguise and evade this...[auto-destructive art] recognises and adopts it”.<sup>191</sup> This supports Metzger's original argument that “auto-destructive art demonstrates man's power to accelerate disintegrative processes of nature”.<sup>192</sup> The purposeful use of disintegrative processes in artworks prohibits their preservation, which ICOM defines as:

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188 Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art* (London: Coracle, 1996), p. 42.

189 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

190 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

191 Houédard, Dom Sylvester. 'Aesthetics of the Death Wish', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 5 (August 1966), p. 49.

192 Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art* (London: Coracle, 1996), p. 59.



Action taken to retard or prevent deterioration or damage to cultural properties by control of their environment and/or treatment of their structure in order to maintain them as nearly as possible in an unchanging state.<sup>193</sup>

Attempts to prevent or slow change in a work of disintegrative auto-destructive art may ultimately hinder the aims of the artist. However, such actions are sometimes necessary when acting in the best interests of the collection. Concerns may arise, for instance, when the deterioration process creates toxic byproducts or unpleasant odors that impact museum staff and the public. Putrefied organic materials can also attract pests that place other objects in the collection at risk.<sup>194</sup> Conservators and collection managers must balance these considerations against the conviction of the artist's intentions when deciding how best to care for destruction artworks.

In some cases, the artist's intentions may be deemed of overriding importance. One example is the work, *Peeling Off Painting* (1957), by Gutai artist Saburo Murakami. Curator Paul Schimmel, relates how this painting, in a particularly fragile state, is deliberately loaned out by the museum which acquired it in order that the paint may continue to peel off in transit as the artist intended. Schimmel recalls his amazement that the conservator responsible for the work “would allow the wishes of the artist to supersede her knowledge that eventual destruction would occur to this work of

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193 ICOM, *The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession*, Paris: ICOM, 1981, Sec. 2.1, in Laurenson, Pip. 'Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations,' *Tate Papers*, Autumn 2006.

(<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06autumn/laurenson.htm>), 28 July 2007, p. 2.

194 Wharton, Glenn. 'The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art' in *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*. ed. Altshuler, Bruce (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 173.

art”.<sup>195</sup> The conservator's decision in this case highlights the individual approach in preserving destruction artworks and how these decisions are influenced by factors such as artistic intentionality.

### **The 'impermanent collection': A conflict of influences?**

“Museums assume that collected artworks have something to offer future generations, as testaments to our time or as expressions of individual genius”, writes Wharton. “This zeal to preserve conflicts with artists who want their work to deteriorate or who assign greater value to a concept than its material manifestation”.<sup>196</sup> Conservator Mancusi-Ungaro admits that it is not always possible for museum professionals to please both artist and museum. “We don't necessarily do exactly what the artist wants”, she says. “Museums want to preserve the piece in the state it entered”.<sup>197</sup> As Marontate writes, “within the context of the museums' mandate there is no consensus about whether to try to preserve works made of ephemeral materials or simply to let them disappear, if that is the artist's wish”.<sup>198</sup> Due to the idiosyncrasies surrounding individual artworks, museums rarely have clear guidelines in place on collecting of destructive or ephemeral art. The decision on whether or not to collect such works, therefore, is largely determined by individual cases.

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195 Schimmel, Paul. 'Intentionality and Performance-Based Art', in *Mortality, Immortality? The Legacy of 20th Century Art* ed. Corzo, Miguel Angel (LA: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), p. 136.

196 Wharton, Glenn. 'The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art' in *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*. ed. Altshuler, Bruce (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 164.

197 Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Director of Conservation, Whitney Museum of American Art, in Dupree, Catherine. 'Impermanent Art,' *Harvard Magazine*, (January-February 2002) (<http://www.harvardmagazine.com/on-line/01027.html>), 27 July 2007, p. 2 (reprint).

198 Marontate, Jan. 'Rethinking Permanence and Change in Contemporary Cultural Preservation Strategies', *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, vol. 34, no. 4, (Winter 2005), p. 299.

Some museum professionals have very clear views on the acquisition on non-permanent artworks. “When buying a work, museums should naturally be aware of its vulnerability and thus of the conservation problems that may occur in the (near) future”, warns conservator, Erma Hermens. Some museums even have a clear policy against obtaining art works that are extremely fragile or are, according to their makers, meant to disintegrate over time.<sup>199</sup> Conservator Bill Leisher says:

My feeling is that if you have a work by an artist which is meant to self-destruct, then the museum shouldn't really buy it. Maybe the museum should just borrow it to show. The minute a museum owns it there is a conflict because museums are institutions whose goal is to preserve; on the other hand we want to acknowledge the true artistic intent.<sup>200</sup>

Some museums refuse to collect destruction artworks due to the stigma attached to the acquisition of non-permanent works. Curator Frederick Leen writes:

The problem...is whether a museum should collect art objects with little or no material endurance. This problem is directly linked with the issues of the work's objective authenticity, and with the question of how a museum can collect contemporary art when much of this art is/was directed against the museum...Why collect art for museums when the artist doesn't care whether

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199 Hermens, Erma. 'Proceedings Group II, The Symposium, Modern Art: Who Cares', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), p. 398-399.

200 Informal interview with Bill Leisher, Head of Conservation, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Black, Caroline. 'Conservation Ethics: An Informal Interview,' *WAAC Newsletter*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Western Association for Art Conservation, September 1984), p. 10 (reprint).

the work's physical stability is guaranteed?...[I] believe that a (public) museum's acquisition policy should exclude all works of art that do not respond to the criterion of reasonable material stability. Reasonable material stability means that the object's materials resist accelerated decay and can be restored or, following the artist's written instructions, replaced.<sup>201</sup>

Leen gives three reasons for adopting this policy. Firstly, the acquisition of objects which are beyond stabilisation and subject to an irreversible degradation process contradicts the museum's primary task to preserve the works in its collection.<sup>202</sup> Secondly, for purely economic reasons, it is irresponsible to invest public money in the preservation of cultural objects that cannot be preserved.<sup>203</sup> And thirdly, artists are aware of museums' primary responsibility to preserve the objects in their collections from deterioration. Therefore, if an ephemeral work is not accompanied by the artist's certified description of the work and instructions for its re-realisation/reinstallation or restoration, it should be assumed that it shouldn't be preserved, at least not in its present material form.<sup>204</sup> “The museum cannot save / preserve something the nature of which is to draw its 'raison d'être' from its decay”, writes Leen.<sup>205</sup> While destructive and ephemeral artworks undoubtedly present significant challenges to the conservator, decisions on whether or not to preserve a work should be the result of considered deliberation based on artist communications and research, rather than assumption, as Leen suggests.

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201 Leen, Frederick. 'Should Museums Collect Ephemeral Art?' in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), p. 376.

202 *Ibid.*, p. 376.

203 *Ibid.*, p. 376.

204 *Ibid.*, p. 376.

205 *Ibid.*, p. 376.

Some museum professionals are less skeptical in their assessment of destruction artworks, viewing the acquisition of these works as an opportunity rather than a liability. Museum Director, David Elliott writes:

It's our job to respond to what artists do...If these potential problems are part of the material aspects which give the value to the art work and it is a piece you really want to purchase, I think you should acquire it anyway. Even if its auto-destruction is part of it. One should have the courage to make the purchase and then reflect on the future status of the work. If it is meant to destroy itself, this process of auto-destruction will be displayed in the museum. What is left of it at the end will show some traces which are either displayable or not displayable, but they would be there in the museum in one way or another.<sup>206</sup>

Developing a flexible, proactive approach towards collecting, attuned to contemporary art practices, enables museums to build comprehensive and well-balanced collections. Recent works, such as 'Young British Artist' Michael Landy's *Breakdown* (2001) show that while the legacy of destruction art may be guaranteed, the museum's role in the presentation and interpretation of this art, is not. Landy's piece, which took place, not at a museum, but at the former C&A department store in London, consisted of the systematic destruction of the artist's possessions. The artist and his team took two weeks to catalogue, weigh, dismantle and pulverize 7,006 objects. These included works by Landy and others artists, including a drawing by

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206 David Elliott, Director, Moderna Museet, Stockholm in Scholte, Tatja. 'Museum Directors' Forum', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* ed. Hummelen, Ijsbrand and Sillé, Dionne (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), pp. 421-422.

destruction artist Jean Tinguely, one of Landy's major influences.<sup>207</sup> At the end of the process all that was left were 'bags of rubbish', none of which were sold or exhibited in any form. In sacrificing such personal and meaningful objects, Landy challenged both the significance of the physical object and its role in defining the artwork.

## **Conclusion**

While ethical, legal, and moral codes help influence the preservation of destruction artworks, the final decision on how to preserve a work must ultimately be made by museum professionals. Decisions to collect and preserve destruction artworks are highly individual by nature and depend upon several factors, including the artist's intentions and the nature of the work. Developing an understanding of these and other factors can greatly assist museums in the documentation and conservation of their collections. The initiation of artist interviews, detailed studies of artists' intentions, materials and techniques, and the institution of comprehensive documentation strategies can provide museums with a valuable base of resources upon which to base future decisions.

Respect for artists and their works must be carefully balanced with other important factors such as accessibility and collections care. This equilibrium is achievable through careful research, detailed planning, and an individual approach to each artwork. By examining the issues involved in the preservation of destruction art and understanding what makes these works problematic, museum professionals can develop suitable policies for future cases.

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207 Withers, Rachel. 'Break Down, 2001 exhibition', *Artforum*, (May 2001).

The variations evident in the case studies presented in this paper show that further research is needed in order to form a comprehensive study of destruction art. Wider, more extensive surveys of museum collections may show trends in the way destruction artworks are preserved and interpreted. Due to the subjective nature of these decisions, the existence of accurate empirical evidence to inform such an approach is questionable. Studies of the existing literature have shown the importance of case studies in exploring issues related to the preservation of destruction art.

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