

# Art and Destruction



# Art and Destruction

Edited by

Jennifer Walden

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P U B L I S H I N G

Art and Destruction, Edited by Jennifer Walden

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# INTRODUCTION

The connection between art and destruction has occurred in various ways throughout art's history. Most familiarly art is the focus of destruction by acts of iconoclasm insofar as art is the vehicle for religious imagery. As familiar is the destruction of art by oppressive regimes concerned with the aesthetic and intellectual freedom certain works may continue to symbolise. Alternatively of course, destruction may take place via interventions by the public. This may be by individuals fighting a political or personal cause or, for the sake of the dismantling of 'the old order', particular symbolic works or edifices may be destroyed by revolutionary groups. There is also a more intimate history of unexplained defacing or acts of destroying of art works, whether in museums or public places, often referred to as 'art vandalism'. Art actions and art movements exist whose *raison d'être* is destruction. These have taken various forms from large themed and ambitious auto destructive art movements to intricate counterpoints to the making of art, which involve the literal breaking with the tradition by breaking the made object. Modernity itself has been characterised as the destruction of tradition. Thus far *historically* art and destruction, as well as creation, have never been far away from each other. On a more philosophical basis the thinker Walter Benjamin argued for the 'destruction' of reified experience to provide the conditions of possibility for new relation to the world. Art and history play a complex part in this, in Benjamin's thinking.<sup>1</sup> Similarly Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy radicalise Heidegger's 'Destruktion' as a dismantling of traditional philosophical thinking, to become for Derrida and Nancy a 'deconstructive' ethics and justice as the conditions of the 'openness' of our being with others in the world. Arguably art stands as the mode in which this 'de (con) structive turn' remarks itself.<sup>2</sup>

The essays collected here respond variously to the themes outlined above. Originating as a call for interest in the theme it is intriguing to note the extent to which this call drew responses steeped in the contemporary or modern, as if destruction has become a certain kind of modern phenomenon in our consciousness. It is the case that most fertile sources for art and destruction collected here came from critical engagement with or reflective description of the work of contemporary artists, intervening with the conventions and structures of art making or its institutional sites

and places; a sign of a times perhaps, when contemporary art might 'eat itself' in its desires to take itself to places and elicit intellectual and affective responses to the particularities of a cultural climate, increasingly global, of various and insidious forms of destructive experience.

It is also evident that destruction has particular relevance and resonance in relation to objects always felt to be as precarious as they are precious, in terms of highly prized or less highly prized but as certainly emotionally invested as ceramic objects of either use or ornament. This leads to experience taking on a further dimension where it is the case that a number of artists inscribe the experience of the audience into the destructive character of the work, either as physical participants or as witnesses to acts of destruction 'before their eyes' or before their bodies. This brings those issues of 'participation' and whether it is willing or not into this area of activity.

'Willing' turns to 'wilful' when it comes to examples of modern and contemporary acts of physical intervention by the public in relation to artworks and iconoclasm in gallery and museum spaces. The contemporary element in these acts of 'violation' appears to be identification with the artist and/or the work to the extent that the iconoclast feels obligated to intervene. This is an interesting take on the notion of art and the 'experiencing public' in that the turn to 'experience' might be reaping an unintended consequence.

As engaging and forceful is the reference to film as a medium of and for destruction and the impact that can have on our understanding and experience of the cinematic and filmic and the part it can play in our very sense of 'obliteration'.

Two essays refer to art's response to destruction in terms of destruction on a mass scale through war. One response draws upon a powerful and at times both comedic and tragic surrealistic commentary on the damaged cityscapes of England. The other engages more philosophically in a set of questions about art's place in remembering mass destruction and the struggle to elicit a 'just' and 'justified' response.

Overall, bringing together art and destruction raises some important questions for art and its place in historical and contemporary cultural shaping of life. Insofar as acts of destruction of artworks both shock but at the same time might 'liberate' one calls to mind Walter Benjamin's understanding of technological forces which can destroy the 'aura' of works; the aura that traps perception of those works in the powerful accretions of inhibiting tradition.<sup>3</sup> One can call to mind something of the effect of the 'ruin' and 'ruination' that Benjamin wanted us to see differently, as opening up and illuminating perceptions to histories and

configurations of experience and potential futures, previously hidden in the sediment of tradition. It is the case that Benjamin was commenting upon technological developments of reproducibility as stripping away aura or as critical interventions as the ‘mortification’ of works liberating their ephemeral beauty into ‘truth’ content, rather than the physical destruction of art, but something of the experience of art’s physical destruction might indeed resonate. That said of course we at the same time might heed Benjamin’s warning, expressed here by Graham MacPhee:

If Benjamin looked to the ruin of beauty in technological modernity, what he terms ‘the decay of aura’, in order to illuminate different possibilities of knowledge, he also recognised that technologically penetrated experience involves a tendency to aestheticise ruin. In *One Way Street* he observes wryly that as we longingly look up through the broken architecture of a ruined castle our ‘gaze meets passing clouds’ re-inscribing the fixed spatio-temporal organisation which Benjamin characterised as auratic...the transient spectacle offered by the ruin may itself coalesce and limit futurity, so that destruction paradoxically ‘reaffirms the eternity of these ruins’.<sup>4</sup>

### **About this collection**

Laura Gray examines how the ontologically unstable nature of the contemporary clay vessel is supported by the strong presence of destruction in vessel-based contemporary ceramics practice. Not only connecting with the twentieth century history of iconoclastic sculpture, the shared language of iconoclasm appears to allow the development of a relationship between ceramics and sculpture that cuts both ways. While artists working with clay can be seen to be making use of both the visual language and at times the ideology of iconoclasm by invoking – although inviting and to an extent controlling – acts of violence and destruction directed towards their work, sculptors have also shown a desire to bring together ceramics and the language of destruction. Ai Weiwei, Jeppe Hein and Richard Wentworth have all united ceramic pots and plates with destruction (understood as occurring in a number of guises). Though not a rejection of the vessel form itself, which is so often reconstructed and resurrected after its destruction, much of this destructive practice involves the museum as a site of iconoclasm, and even as an active participant in the destruction of work. Lütticken has stated that, ‘While it is often remarked that iconoclasm generates new images, this says nothing about their nature and quality’ (Lütticken, *Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle* 2009). The essay addresses this gap in the understanding of iconoclasm, as it relates to work in the medium of clay,

by examining the product of the iconoclastic act as well as the significance of the moment of destruction.

This theme is taken up again from a different stance by Miranda Stearn. Her interest is in part in those artists who make destruction part of their material practice but also the artist who turns from a material to a conceptual positioning of destruction in the guise of the 'anti-curator'. *'Over several months, I have been exploring the museum stores and collecting my own little cabinet of curiosities. Each day over the next forty days I will choose an object from my collection and offer it up in a spirit of sacrifice. The object will be announced through a variety of media, including this blog. I will then destroy it. This destruction will inevitably take place unless someone cares for the object [...] In the absence of some positive appreciation of the object – a poem, a video, a child's drawing, a scientific assessment, etc., etc. – I will assume that it is of no value to anyone and should no longer take up space in the archive'* (Blog post by Ansuman Biswas, 29 June 2009). As Stearn suggests, inviting an artist to make a selection from a permanent collection is a long established model for museum-commissioned artist interventions, with examples emerging in the 1970s with projects such as Andy Warhol's *Raid the Icebox* (1969-70) and Anthony Caro's inauguration of the *Artist Eye* series at London's National Gallery (1977), continuing in various incarnations to the present day with Grayson Perry's *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (2011). In 2009, artist Ansuman Biswas took this provocative intervention in stored collections to a new level during his *Manchester Hermit* project while in residence at Manchester Museum. Biswas's residency lasted a symbolic 40 days and 40 nights, 27 June – 5 August 2009. Categorising Biswas's project as an example of artist-as-curator initiatives can seem problematic. The role he assumed throughout the project, during which he threatened to destroy one object from the museum's stored collections each day throughout his forty day retreat, could be seen instead as that of anti-curator. Her essay examines the tensions that arise when the invited artist introduces destruction, rather than preservation, into the museum.

Taking a stronger narrative line Imogen Racz explores the history and exhibiting of a particular work by Cornelia Parker, *Thirty Pieces of Silver*. The essay focuses on Cornelia Parker's *Thirty Pieces of Silver* within the context of her broader interest in destruction initiating new life. It considers how the memory and sentiment put onto particular objects in the home have been transformed through abandonment, ritualised destruction and then exhibition in the gallery. The home is developed over time through the accretion of memories, rituals, effort and care. Possessions play their part in personal narratives, and although mass produced, silver objects

occupy a special place through being celebratory, repeatedly polished and displayed. This sentimental link had already been destroyed in the act of betrayal in sending the objects to garage sales. Parker took photographs of these objects, giving them a fictitious life, before directing a steam roller over the laid out objects. This ritualised 'death' through using the heavy, male, amateur, hobbyist tool, was way beyond the necessary. Just as their formation had been through industrial might, the objects' deformation was achieved through a documented performance of mass destruction. These pools of hanging silver are now part of the Tate's collection, perfectly preserved in their artistic optimal state. The playful ritualised death of each object has ironically meant that their new function is still associated with display, memory and ritual, but rather than being personal and identity forming, they now reach out to a broader scaffolding of cultural memory.

Joanna Sperry-Jones takes some of the breaking encountered earlier in this collection in a very specific direction in terms of investigating the relationship between her 'breaking art' with her 'breaking of writing'. As Sperry-Jones narrates, her embarkation on PhD research brings her up against what she experiences as the futility of using writing as a means to translate visual thinking and the negative effect of this type of writing on the artwork. She therefore turns things around so that, rather than analysing the thinking within the artwork she has attempted to reflect the approach of the artwork in writing. As the work's content is breaking so too is this directly reflected in the form of the writing. To make the writing she has literally physically cut up previous versions, added new additions on post-it notes and completely rearranged it, before then rewriting. Sperry-Jones reminds us that there is also a strong theme of breaking on a philosophical level. This revolves around Barthes' pleasure of the text as the seam between two registers of discourse, Benjamin's allegory as a process of shattering old relationships to make possibilities for new juxtapositions and Frey's 'fragmentary' as constituting a different order to that based on the whole. Through these she proposes a space for making art that reflects the elements of risk, uncertainty and paradox.

So far in this collection destruction has been linked to the agency of the artist. Some of the strongest associations of art and destruction however come from acts of iconoclasm from the agency of others outside of the work. Helen E Scott takes up this issue. There are various circumstances in which museums can become the scenes of iconoclastic acts. A political agitator may slash a famous painting to draw attention to their cause, while a bored child may scribble graffiti on a sculpture if they are not engaged by displays. Gallery exhibits are inherently vulnerable when placed within public reach. Sometimes even artists pose a threat. In

1974 a young artist entered MOMA in New York and spray-painted "KILL LIES ALL" onto Picasso's *Guernica*. Tony Shafrazi was not jealous of Picasso's success, nor did he reject the significance of his work. Instead, Shafrazi claimed that his behaviour was prompted by a desire to revive and celebrate *Guernica*. Believing that he was forging a creative dialogue with Picasso, Shafrazi did not see himself as damaging the painting, but enhancing it. He insisted that he was contributing to Picasso's legacy, and that his gesture was artistic in itself. This episode ignited what has since become an ongoing problem in the museum sector. Every so often an individual will attack a work on display and assert that this constitutes a piece of conceptual or performance art. The phenomenon has blurred the boundaries between criminality and creativity, and proved difficult for galleries to suppress. This essay investigates acts of 'artistic' iconoclasm, tracing the roots of the problem before examining some case studies. Assaults on works by Duchamp, Malevich and Hirst are considered. The essay highlights the difficulties that museums face in responding to incidents, and concludes with some recommendations.

Olga Moskatova considers destruction from the point of view of cameraless film. The transition from analog to digital technology has provoked a discourse of analog obsolescence and 'death of cinema'. Often, the obsolescence debate results in a theoretical and practical re-evaluation of indexicality and of traces. Contemporary experimental films take a great interest in the material and technical conditions of celluloid film. In key experimental work the aim has been to treat and destroy the film strip by means of cameraless, direct techniques like painting, scratching, chemicals, bacteria, heat, blanking or weather. This aggressive treatment raises the question of material durability, analog referentiality, limits of reproducibility, strategies of 'reauratization' 'and' 'death of cinema'. These wider cultural and theoretical implications of technological change provide the basis for the examination of aesthetic strategies of destruction in cameraless experimental film. The basic approach aims to differentiate the notion and thereby the aesthetic practice of destruction. The essay suggests three nuances of destruction: destruction, destructuring and des-obstruction. The terms are developed in reference to Vilém Flusser and Jacques Derrida. The terms highlight different interest in material damaging and in representation of the body. All strategies deal with fugacity, death, recollection, decay and aging, at narrative and formal levels, but accentuate them almost antithetically. These three approaches establish different relations between order and dysfunction as well as between dysfunction (Störung) and destruction (Zerstörung). For this reason they each show a different understanding of images and work either in an

affirmative/nostalgic, iconoclastic or constructive way. The argument is supported by referring to three exemplary camera less films (Johannes Hammel, *Die Liebenden*, 2007; Carl E. Brown, *Memory Fade*, 2009; Jürgen Reble, *Zillertal*, 1991).

The collection then moves to considerations of representations that are about destruction rather than materially making by acts destruction. In the first of these Lynn Hilditch makes the case that Lee Miller's photographs of the London Blitz, including the twenty-two published in Ernestine Carter's *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire* (1941) effectively demonstrate what Susan Sontag described as "a beauty in ruins". As a former student and muse of Man Ray during the 1930s and a close associate of the Surrealists in Paris, Miller was able to utilize her knowledge of Surrealism, and other art forms, to create an aestheticized reportage of a broken city ravished by war. In Miller's case, her war photographs may be deemed aesthetically significant by considering her Surrealist background and by analyzing her images within the context of André Breton's theory of "convulsive beauty"—his idea that a scene of destruction can be represented or analyzed as something beautiful by convulsing, or transforming, it into its apparent opposite. Miller's war photographs, therefore, not only depict the chaos and destruction of Britain during the Blitz, they also reveal Surrealism's love for quirky or evocative juxtapositions while creating an artistic visual representation of a temporary surreal world of fallen statues and broken typewriters. As Leo Mellor writes about these dualities, "The paradox of Miller's wartime reportage was announced in the title of her book of documentary photographs, *Grim Glory*; that is to say, the coexistence of darkening mortality and ideal exaltation, like a Baroque conceit".

The aesthetic and the documenting of war's destruction arise again in Jennifer Walden's questioning piece. Some 50 years ago the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* caused a scandal for its audacity in apparently comparing the enormity of the atrocity of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima with the personal tragic love story of a French woman. This scandal was augmented by the opening sequence of the film which appeared to make a direct comparison between the ecstasy of love and the extreme devastation of this act of war, by inscribing the effects of each upon two embracing bodies. Different readings of the film have negotiated that apparent intensification upon the body, as a means to critique the 'norms' of representation of and response to mass destruction that still marks our response to disaster and mass conflict post 'Hiroshima'. We still seem to be struggling with how to 'frame' destruction, insisting on a representation 'proper' to it, even as we know it is a 'ruinous' project. Such

interpretation takes on new applicability in the wake of recent 'disavowals' of the death of some and barriers, as Judith Butler has it, "against which we struggle when we try to find out about the losses that we are asked not to mourn" (Butler (2004) *Precarious Life*, Verso p.46)). Such barriers, the very 'frames' we seem insistent upon may be resisted by way of alternative mediations of injustice written more profoundly and perhaps provocatively 'in the ruins' and "starkly upon the body and its abjection" (Butler (2009) *Frames of War*, Verso p.130 and *passim*). This essay engages with readings of the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, by way of the critical positions towards notions of war, justice, community, and remembrance that the work of Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Gilles Deleuze provide. This is to consider what a 'just' mourning of, and remembering of the injustices of past and present, and a true sense of a "justice-to-come" might be in terms of a visual cultural response to destruction. It is perhaps somewhere between an overarching impersonal notion of the abject and an over-wrought personalisation, a denial of identity and an excessive inscription of identity, that an 'other' justice emerges, to give to the remembering of destruction.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin W, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Benjamin, *Illuminations* trans Harry Zohn London 1970

<sup>2</sup> See Derrida, J., 'Perhaps or Maybe' and 'On Responsibility' in Dronsfeld J. and Midgely N., eds *Responsibilities of Deconstruction* PLI Warwick Journal of Philosophy Vol 6 1997 and Nancy J-L 'Of Being Singular Plural' in Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* trans Richardson, R and O'Byrne A. E California, Stanford University Press 2000

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin 'The Work of Art...' *op.cit*

<sup>4</sup> MacPhee, G "Beautiful Knowledge, or Reproducing the University Again? Walter Benjamin and the Institution of Knowledge" in *Culture Machine* Volume 2 (2000) [www.culturemachine.net](http://www.culturemachine.net)



## CHAPTER ONE

# ‘NO CONSTRUCTION WITHOUT DESTRUCTION’: CERAMICS, SCULPTURE AND ICONOCLASM

LAURA GRAY

‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’  
—T.S. Elliot, *The Wasteland*

This chapter uses destruction within artistic practice as a framework for thinking about and investigating the relationship between ceramics and sculpture. The question motivating this chapter is: In what ways is the notion of iconoclasm shared by ceramics and sculpture? Or put another way, how can the destruction of art provide a point at which the relationship between ceramics and sculpture is both negotiated and revealed?

In this chapter I will argue that destruction is important as a meeting point between ceramics and sculpture. A significant number of sculptors and artists working with clay are using the act of destruction as artistic gesture, which includes destruction as a performative strategy. I will suggest that the importance of this meeting point is in part because the shared concern with the artistic exploration of the potential of destruction occurs in the same time period (the late 1990s through to the present day), and in part because the use of destruction as an artistic strategy appears to dissolve boundaries between the two disciplines. In this chapter I will show that ceramics is not using a form or method of working current among sculptors some fifty or sixty years ago, as is the case with ceramics’ appropriation of Minimalism during the 1990s. Furthermore, sculptors have appropriated ceramics as a material that not only lends itself to the act of destruction in a physical sense, but they are also using it as a material that has metaphorical importance to the act of destruction beyond its own subject boundaries.

The main body of the chapter positions the act of destruction in two ways, as a creative act that in the first instance unites ceramics and sculpture through the formal gesture of destruction, destruction as a creative act, as an act that has been aestheticised. I will argue that there is a shared formal language, a shared style, which reveals a relationship between ceramics and sculpture. I will also argue that destruction is an intellectual act that is concerned with critique (of the canon of art, of the boundaries of art, of cultural values) and that there is a shared intellectual agenda at work across ceramics and sculpture. In both cases destruction is also viewed as a catalyst for change in the semiotic status of an object.

## **Fragmentation, Breaking and the Meanings of Iconoclasm**

In Egyptian mythology, when Osiris was torn limb from limb his wife Isis collected and buried his fragmented body to ensure his revival in the afterlife. Eros (life) and Thanatos (death) – figures present in Greek mythology and later used by Freud to illustrate his drive theory - embody the duality of existence. This notion is also found in Christianity, expressed in the idea that in the midst of life we are in death. The disruptive aspect of death has its expression in the destruction of art, which can in certain circumstances, also be a form of creative process.

The motif of the dying god-king who makes way for the younger man in order for his kingdom to thrive, the hero of tragedy who has to perish in order to triumph are illustrations of this idea, creation in the wake of destruction, cited by Anton Ehrenzweig in *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967). In iconoclasm – the destruction of an artwork to make way for the new (regime, political thought, religious order, movement in art) - we see an expression of the cycles observed in nature, the coming of the seasons, day coming after night. Considered in this way, the destruction of artwork becomes part of the natural order of life, and an expression of the human condition that we can expect to find expressed across media and disciplines. There is of course another valid position, which is that in most instances destruction of the material or meaning of an artwork is not a creative act. It is appropriate to acknowledge that the view of destruction as creative that is put forward in this chapter is most often associated with avant garde art movements. In art, the Futurists perhaps best embody the notion of the creative aspect of destruction with their views on the purifying role of war and call for the destruction of museums.

The term ‘iconoclasm’ historically refers to religious image breaking. However, contemporary art historical usage of the term has broadened to cover destruction wider than that of sacred objects. Stacy Boldrick and

Richard Clay, editors of *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms* (2007), draw attention to the use of the term iconoclasm by different scholars in the introduction to their book,

‘Simon Baker notes that Dario Gamboni’s term “metaphorical iconoclasm” can be used “to describe something that stands for iconoclasm, taking the place of a physical attack”. On the other hand, in their essay, Reinders and Rambelli use the word “iconoclasm” to refer to damage to an object’s “materiality or to its meaning”’

Citing the example of the destruction of religious objects Reinders and Rambelli suggest that such damage can ‘cause transformations of the semiotic status of those objects. Operating on the materiality – on the body – of a sacred object affects and modifies its symbolic status – its meanings and functions in its cultural contexts’<sup>1</sup>. This understanding of iconoclasm can be transferred to art objects, a shift from the sacred to the secular. Gamboni observes that ‘The *Trésor de la langue française* specifies that the tradition opposed by an ‘iconoclast’ may be literary, artistic, political or of yet another kind’<sup>2</sup>. The scholarly usage of the term ‘iconoclasm’, as demonstrated by Boldrick and Clay, can now be taken to refer to damage to the meaning of the work as much as the material, a situation that serves to immediately reposition the museum and art gallery, previously understood as institutions of care and preservation, as major sites of iconoclasm.

## **Destruction as Formal Gesture**

We move now to the formal relationship between ceramics and sculpture to consider how this relationship is both negotiated and revealed by the artistic gesture of destruction. While showing how destruction provides a meeting point between ceramics and sculpture, I will argue that there is a shared formal language, a shared style, which reveals a relationship between ceramics and sculpture. This attention to formal concerns is intended to draw on this idea of an initial level of interpretation that first examines what can be seen.

## **Formal Concerns: Breaking and Making**

Making something new from fragmentary remains is central to many of the myths we have woven to explain life and the world. Stories of resurrection from death – Osiris being made whole to participate in the afterlife, Persephone and Odysseus visiting the underworld and returning to life, the resurrection of Christ - form part of our collective unconscious.

Destruction as a necessary act taking place before the coming of a new world or new order is also present in art where one style is broken apart and abandoned, facilitating the development of another. But total obliteration of the artwork is not the only option available to those artists who wish to use the formal language of destruction and iconoclasm in their work. Instead, disfigured or repaired vessels can be made to bear witness to what is perhaps the most violent or eventful episode in their history.

During the early to mid-1990s, Richard Wentworth made a number of sculptures in which repaired plates were positioned in conjunction with unlikely objects. In *Brac* (1996) the surface of a grand piano is covered with broken plates, dishes and jugs (the usual car boot sale or charity shop bric-a-brac) that have been repaired with epoxy resin. *Match* (1995) sees a ping-pong table, complete with net, also covered with repaired plates. And in *Rims, Lips, Feet* (1996) plates and dishes, again repaired with epoxy resin are spread over the surface of a large rectangular sheet of glass that is positioned on top of a ceramics cabinet. Wentworth's sculptures do not offer easy meanings. Simon Groom (2005) has suggested that the 'juxtaposition of objects' used by Wentworth have much in common with the comparisons of a metaphysical poem,

'The initial smile of recognition in the conceit of a pairing, however, is often swiftly followed by a nervous laugh, as joy in the unlikely coupling collapses under a further torrent of questions: What are these things doing together? What is its status now as an object? What does it mean?'<sup>3</sup>.

Wentworth's excursion into the language offered by the use of repaired plates, bowls and dishes is redolent of the georgic transformation of the mundane into the sublime, a transformation at the very core of what it means to make art.

The aesthetic of the repaired object present in Wentworth's work has a related but more flamboyant outlet in the work of Bouke de Vries. In de Vries' 'Exploded Artworks' series, the moment of the break is emphasized rather than concealed. It is the primary visual focus of the work. In fact, there is a neat dichotomy at the heart of Bouke de Vries' practice. He is an artist who works with broken ceramics, and he is also a ceramics conservator with clients that include museums, auction houses, antiques dealers, the National Trust and Grayson Perry.

To make his work de Vries reclaims 'broken ceramic objects after their accidental trauma'<sup>4</sup>. Instead of repairing them, as would be his job as a conservator, charged with concealing any traces of this trauma, he heightens the sense of their deconstruction by suspending the broken pieces on Perspex armatures, holding the fragments at the moment of

explosion. Not always knowing how the objects he uses came to be broken, de Vries offers a fictionalized, heightened and dramatic view of the moment of destruction. While not remaking objects in the way that Wentworth does when he glues plates back together with epoxy resin, de Vries does reunite fragments of ceramics. De Vries makes a cohesive single work out of an object whose relationship with its constituent parts was previously in a state of disarray. In the work of de Vries and Wentworth the hand of the iconoclast is anonymous. The focus is not on the artist as iconoclast. Instead, the artist's role is that of an alchemist, transmutating base materials to make a precious object. Of course, the alchemical quest had a spiritual as well as scientific nature. Understood in such a way the transformation of materials is presented as metaphor for personal transmutation and purification.

Bouke de Vries' *Teapot* (2009) is an eighteenth century Chinese armorial porcelain teapot frozen at the moment of explosion. The spout has detached from the rest of the pot, which in turn is now made up of many fragments preserved at a moment of high drama. A puddle of tea and some damp tea leaves spill out from the pot onto a glass plinth. The moment of explosion, it is suggested, has occurred when the teapot was in use, recalling the exploding Worcester teapots when the company couldn't get the recipe for their porcelain quite right.



Fig. 2-1 Bouke de Vries, *Teapot* (2009).

In both of the works above the almost visceral pleasure of broken ceramics has been heightened rather than tempered by the remaking of new works from the fragmented ruins of plates, jugs and teapots. Wentworth's plates are resolutely mundane, and yet their clearly defined repairs call to mind the visible repairs made to classical sculpture. The

juxtaposition of these plates to other objects – a piano, a ping-pong table – brings together two types of familiar object to make something unfamiliar and mysterious, and it is this mystery, as well that gives *Brac* and *Match* a formal resonance that marks them out as sculpture. Michael Bracewell (2005) suggests that,

‘When you look at the art of Richard Wentworth, you see materials and objects which appear domestic, industrial or discarded, their function skewed or broken... Their banality becomes transfigured... You are looking at what appears to be some collaboration between sculpture at its most refined and the seductive environmental doodling described by found objects’<sup>5</sup>.

With the repaired ceramic works it seems as if Wentworth, as a sculptor, cannot help but bring the broken objects back together, restoring the unity of the three-dimensional object. The repaired plates, if not for their curious positioning in relation to other objects, could theoretically return to function. However, there is also a sense of the repairs as part of a process of liberation rather than annihilation that sees the plates released from their functional duties. Bouke de Vries more resolutely denies the object the possibility of functioning again. Or one could say instead that he effects a change on the semiotic status of the teapot from historical but still functional domestic ware, to work of art. A transformation from thing to object that sees the teapot no longer able to pour efficiently, but instead able to engage the interest of the viewer on an entirely different level. In de Vries’ work though the destruction has not been undone or repaired in the manner of Wentworth, rather, it has been prevented from progressing further. The moment of total destruction of the teapot, the shattering of the pieces as they make contact with the floor has not yet been reached and will never be. Nonetheless, the process of breaking and remaking is central to both the process of making the work and its composition.

## **Formal Concerns: The Use of Plates and Domestic Ware**

The formal language of domestic ware continues to have a central place in contemporary ceramics practice. What is more, the meeting between sculpture and ceramics that is facilitated by a joint engagement in processes and acts associated with destruction in many instances uses ordinary plates, cups, teapots, that are churned out of ceramics factories in Stoke and China.

Breaking domestic ceramics has a personal emotional aspect. Those objects that we use or see daily, that make up the day-to-day material world in which we live, become precious objects in a manner that is

unrelated to material worth. The moment of the break of such an object is a painful one: the break of a favourite mug perhaps, or the break of a bowl from a grandparent's dinner service given as a wedding gift. It is this moment that both ceramicist David Cushway and artist Runa Islam have sought to extend in their films. Both artists, in this instance distinguished by discipline not medium, have filmed the slow motion destruction of domestic ceramics. In both films we see a prolonged moment of graceful destruction as the slow motion films make the moment of destruction a hyper-realistic one in which the splintering of every object can be carefully observed and absorbed.

David Cushway's film *Fragments* (2008) recalls the 'visual, emotional, and physical poetics' of Runa Islam's film *Be The First To see What You see As You see It* (2004)<sup>6</sup>. Islam's film allows the viewer to contemplate the measured descent of fragile cups, dishes and saucers towards the floor and probable obliteration. In one moment of Islam's film a woman toys with the lid of a coffee pot, flicking and tipping the lid testing its capacity for movement. In Cushway's film there is no narrative element, and no sign of the hand of the iconoclast. Cushway made his films in collaboration with the University of Wales Engineering Department, experimenting with capturing the moment when a vessel makes contact with a concrete surface. Using the department's high-speed cameras which capture images at 3000 frames per second, Cushway filmed the breaking of ordinary domestic ceramic objects 'which could then be slowed down and edited to run backwards, so that the objects break and then reform themselves'<sup>7</sup>. For Cushway, the importance of this use of technology was that it allowed the viewer to witness an ordinary occurrence in an extraordinary way. The high-speed camera allows Cushway to document the moment of destruction, slowing down to minutes an event that we would usually experience only in a split second. The sickening inevitability of the impending moment of destruction is transformed into an extended moment of anticipation as the viewer expectantly waits for the visceral moment of the meeting of teapot and hard surface.

Both Cushway and Islam are interested in manipulating the moment of destruction. Writing about *Be The First To see What You see As You see It* Janet Owen describes 'Inside the space of a luminous screen, some objects are broken and then are seen whole again. Others, offering a climax cut short by the next frame, are arrested in the moment before impact'<sup>8</sup>.

However, undermining the moment of destruction can pose difficulties. The very reconstruction of the teapot in *Fragments* caused by Cushway looping the film so that the teapot or cup reform is the moment that the film falters and fails to convince. The emotional effect of seeing broken china is undermined as, like Nahum Tate's rewriting Shakespeare's plays giving them happy endings, the teapot comes back together. The moment of climax, the emotion of the break, is momentary as the teapot is resurrected before our very eyes.

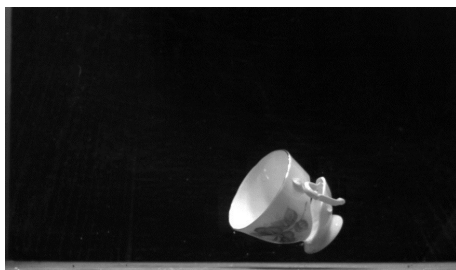


Fig. 2-2 David Cushway, still from *Fragments* (2008)

The shared formal language of domestic ware seen in the work of Runa Islam and David Cushway demonstrates the extension of the range of operation that mass-produced common objects can have in the hands of an artist. However, while artists continue to work with industrially produced domestic ware, this relationship is not without its difficulties if one considers this use as taking place in conjunction with acts of destruction. These ordinary objects are subjected to artist-sanctioned destruction in the work of Cushway and Islam. The aesthetic effect created by the use of run-of-the-mill ceramics is simultaneously familiar and uncanny. The destruction of the familiar is emotional, and within that moment of destruction are painful evocations of death, loss and change.

### **Formal Concerns: The Shared Use of Medium**

This section focuses on material as a shared formal element and considers how this element contributes to the overall impression made by the work. Certain materials carry certain connotations. The durability of sculptures in bronze and marble suggest that the ideas these sculptures represent - memory, tradition, political ideology – are equally durable. The destruction of sculptures (political or religious for instance) made in such durable materials is a powerful gesture. Ceramic on the other hand is



inherently fragile and easily broken without force. One could draw the conclusion that breaking something that is easily broken is not a powerful act, but the use of ceramic by artists who use the gesture of destruction suggests otherwise. This section will examine the ways in which ceramic as a material is approached in destructive practice.

Clare Twomey's 2010 work *Is It Madness. Is it Beauty* was the result of a collaboration with choreographer Siobhan Davies. The starting point for the partnership was Davies' interest in choreography and dance as a creative act that can be a trigger for other creative acts. A dance piece by Davies called *The Score*, in which four dancers move in a circle around a fixed point, became the starting point for an ensemble of works by nine artists known under the collective title of *ROTOR*.



Fig. 2-3 Siobhan Davies, *The Score* (2010).

The dance was filmed from above, and the patterns and repetitions in the movements of the dancers 'triggered new work which responded not only to the images from the dance but also to the energies, counterpoints or character developed by the dancers actions'<sup>9</sup>. Twomey described *Is It Madness. Is it Beauty* as 'a performative piece that other people will perform but I'm kind of authoring'<sup>10</sup>. In this sense, the work is not such a departure for Twomey as the performative element might initially indicate. The authoring of work that others perform is a fitting description of Twomey's *Trophy* (2006), an event that filled the cast courts at the V&A with four thousand birds made of Wedgwood blue jasper clay.



Fig. 2-4 Clare Twomey, *Trophy* (2006). Photo credit: Dan Prince.

The covetable birds (each marked with the back-stamps of Wedgwood, the Victoria & Albert Museum and Twomey) sitting amongst the classical sculptures created a three-dimensional landscape to walk within, the pleasure of doing so heightened by the freedom for visitors to select and take home their favourite birds. Over the course of a day the installation disappeared from sight. Though the work was dismantled and effectively destroyed, equally, the work only became complete with the participation of the public in the removal of the birds.

The ephemerality of *Trophy*, as well as the co-opting of the visitor as performer, was a feature of what is perhaps Twomey's earliest important work, *Consciousness/Conscience* (realized at the World Ceramic Biennial in Korea in 2001 and again realized for the exhibitions *Approaching Content* in 2003 and *A Secret History of Clay* in 2004). In this work, the visitor walks across, and therefore crushes, hollow bone china tiles laid as if they were floor tiles. In this way, the presence of ceramic, destruction and performance in *Is It Madness. Is it Beauty* is prefigured in Twomey's earlier work. In *Trophy*, Twomey plays on the desirability of porcelain as a material that is elevated in status through back-stamps and their institutional and historical associations. In *Consciousness/Conscience* the relationship with material is decidedly more corporeal in that the initial reaction to the work as a participant relates to the effect of the weight of the body on china and how it feels to crush the tiles. An intellectual

response is secondary to the experience of the materiality of the work. In this work the relationship between material and viewer is in the first instance destructive and exploratory, followed by the intellectual considerations of conscience and consciousness suggested by the title of the piece. The primary focus of the work is the materiality of china, and what happens to hollow tiles when they come into contact with the pressure of the foot. This is the starting point for the work, and for its interpretations. In this way material is the element that contributes most to the overall impression made by the work.

*Is It Madness. Is it Beauty* is a work that, at the time of writing, has been realised at three locations, the Siobhan Davies dance studio in London, the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester and at the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh. In each location, a number of grey trestle-type tables are laid end to end. The surface of the tables is covered with neatly arranged, identical, unfired clay vessels.



Fig. 2-5 Clare Twomey, *Is It Madness. Is it Beauty* (2010).

Behind the tables more vessels are neatly stacked, waiting. What the visitor will see depends on the moment at which the piece is encountered. Perhaps nothing is happening and only a chair and mop and bucket hint at the possibility of performance. Though a closer look reveals that some of the pots on the tables are collapsing in on themselves, and there is a slow drip drip drip of water from the table to the floor. Perhaps you catch the performance at a different stage: a woman carefully pouring water from a jug into the vessels on the table; or the same woman walking round the tables and rhythmically mopping the floor.

These are some of the quiet moments that form *Is It Madness. Is it Beauty*, a work of near silent destruction in which water gradually breaks

down the unfired vessels uniformly arranged on the tables. As with *Trophy* and *Consciousness/Conscience* Twomey endorses the destruction of her work, instructs others to carry it out, but does not perform the destruction herself. The artist is absent from the moment of iconoclasm, but her endorsement removes the guilt from the pleasure of crushing a tile underfoot, or stealing something from a public museum for one's personal enjoyment at home.



Fig. 2-6 (left) Clare Twomey, *Is It Madness. Is it Beauty* (2010)

Fig. 2-7 (right) Clare Twomey, *Is It Madness. Is it Beauty* (2010)

This work is the only instance in this chapter where an artist is using unfired clay as their material. Using unfired clay rather than ceramic means that the gesture of destruction must be recalibrated to take into account the material properties of leather hard clay. Not brittle, clay in this state cannot be smashed (in the manner of Runa Islam or David Cushway), nor crushed (in the manner of *Consciousness/Conscience*). The method of destruction responds to material. By pouring water into the vessels a process of erosion is set in motion. This process happens slowly. There is no need to slow down real time as Cushway and Islam have done, or freeze time like de Vries.

Yarislal and Kublitz's *Anger Release Machine* (2006) harnesses the destruction of ceramics as a moment of release and catharsis for the destroyer. Keeping the destruction at one step removed through the mechanized operation of a vending machine, the act of obliteration is commoditized and available without the guilt, loss, and consequences that

an iconoclast might otherwise experience. *Anger Release Machine* takes the form of a vending machine that dispenses ceramic and glass vessels, but instead of delivering them safely to the purchaser to be used, the vessels are released to smash in the bottom of the machine in order to deliver a moment of stress release through vessel-breaking.



Fig. 2-8 Yarisal and Kublitz, *Anger Release Machine* (2006).

*Anger Release Machine* places the destruction of ceramics at centre of the work, encouraging associations such as the commoditization of iconoclasm, mass production, disposability and the lack of status of ceramics, as well as the negation of the visceral, physical aspect of iconoclasm. This is iconoclasm that is not performed by the artists, but is clearly sanctioned by them, for the payment of a small fee. *Anger Release Machine* also shows us destruction without construction, in which in the moment of the smash is the final moment, nothing further is available to the viewer apart from repetition of the experience with a different object. The act of destruction is not recorded, and no image is created. Even the residue of the broken plates and bowls remains behind the glass of the vending machine. The separation of viewer/iconoclast from the object, a feature of *Anger Release Machine*, emphasizes the poignancy and immediacy of the destruction of ceramics in the work of Ai Weiwei and Clare Twomey. The total obliteration of the physical vessel in their work leaves a powerful residue that is not only linked to the value of the vessels, as

Twomey's work demonstrates. In *Anger Release Machine* ceramic seems only to be employed for its ability to shatter. Ceramic objects sit alongside glass ones in the vending machine. Neither material is valued for more than this ability to break when it hits the bottom of the machine.

The visual effect of the use of clay and ceramic in works that also involve destruction can be dramatic or quiet: a sharp, sudden break, or slow and silent erosion. There is destruction that is over in an instant and destruction that is gradual and can hardly be noticed. The use of material is an element that contributes to the overall impression made by an artwork, and it is the use of ceramic or clay in the hands of the artist that is the starting point for the interpretation of these works. The treatment of material offers a way into the work, a first step in drawing out potential meanings. Material, in this case clay and ceramic, is also an important component of the imagery of the work, as well as component of its construction. The aesthetic differences in the treatment of ceramics and clay, while they vary artist by artist, do not ultimately seem to be delineated by the status of the artist (artist in clay, or sculptor). While some differences are apparent, as has been suggested in the examples above, these aesthetic differences in the treatment of material are not such that it is possible to identify two different styles of working with ceramics and destruction, one belonging to sculptors and the other to artists working in clay (who work with the material as a matter of course). Instead, the treatment of material reveals a point in which there is convergence between ceramics and sculpture to the point where the boundaries are not only unidentifiable, but also irrelevant to the interpretation of the individual work. In terms of style, the work of Twomey, Cushway and Yarisal and Kublitz for example, illustrates a style – the unification of ceramics and the artistic gesture of destruction – that crosses disciplinary boundaries without regard for established categories of art.

## **Destruction as Meaning in Ceramics and Sculpture**

The formal qualities of the works discussed above provide a foundation upon which to develop the notion of destruction as an intellectual concept in ceramics and sculpture. This second part of the chapter will now consider how the act of destruction comes to mean something. This section positions destruction in art as an act of institutional and cultural critique (with particular reference to the boundaries of art). Here, in a development of the formal analysis that took place in the earlier part of this chapter, the act of destruction is understood as a sign that stands for something else.