

Is this the new brutalism?

Why smash up art?
HESTER WESTLEY
 punches her way through a history of vandalism

In between bouts of shooting up, the writer and political activist Alexander Trocchi proclaimed in 1962: "Modern art begins with the destruction of the object." What Trocchi probably had in mind was some lofty postmodern idea about the destruction of the commodifiable art object.

It is unlikely that he was referring to the sort of destruction that an unsuspecting London gallery invigilator witnessed last week at a trendy East End show on Vyner Street, when a man breezed in with an iron bar and started demolishing one of the exhibits, Tim Shaw's sculpture of the naked, portly and proudly erect *Silenus*, shouting: "You're worshipping the wrong God!"

Silenus's left arm was dismembered, both his antlers damaged, his face was bashed in and his impressive phallus hacked at. Shaw is about to start reconstructing the work and says he is shocked by "such an extraordinary act, though part of me is honoured that my work has provoked so much feeling in someone — that's the function of art".

It isn't too much of a stretch to confuse this particular art incident with a generic art "happening", when, in the language of the art theorists, destruction seamlessly turns into deconstruction. But destruction in art is something quite different from the destruction of art.

In general, vandalism of art is still pretty rare. But this month it feels as though the iconoclasts are winning, as, across Europe, art vandals have been running riot. On the night a



Lunacy and protest

1914, National Gallery, London A suffragette, Mary Richardson, took a meat chopper to Velasquez's *The Toilet of Venus* in protest against the incarceration of Emmeline Pankhurst.

1972, St Peter's Basilica, Vatican A geologist struck Michelangelo's *Pietà* 15 times with a hammer.

1974, Museum of Modern Art, New York An artist, Tony Shafrazi, sprayed "Kill Lies All" on Picasso's anti-war painting *Guernica*, ostensibly in protest against US actions in Vietnam.

1975, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam an unemployed teacher took a bread knife to Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*.

1985, Hermitage, St Petersburg A lunatic slashed and poured acid over Rembrandt's *Danae*.

1997, RA, London A Myra Hindley portrait was attacked by artists in two incidents.

few weeks ago that Parisians are already calling *la nuit blanche*, a horde of revellers managed to break into the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and slash Claude Monet's 1874 painting *The Bridge at Argenteuil*. Only days separated that event and an attack in the Kulturen Gallery in the Swedish college town of Lund, where seven prints from the controversial artist Andres Serrano's 1976 photographic series *A History of Sex* succumbed to a cocktail of hoodies, crowbars, and death metal. In London this week the shortsighted but less lethally armed employees of Hackney Council braced themselves to whitewash over graffiti by Hollywood's latest art darling Banksy, although one councillor, Alan Laing, insists that the council isn't targeting Banksy especially.

There is something thrilling about attacking art — maybe it's because, for those of us who err on the more

Silenus, before and after the attack; right, a work in Bristol by the graffiti artist Banksy, which was mistakenly painted over by city council workers in March



passive side of art spectatorship, there is something verboten about even touching it, let alone destroying it. Attacking art is utterly antithetical to displaying it, appreciating it. It would seem that our recent East End attacker harboured some ideological issues with *Silenus*, a sculpture that its owner (the collector David Roberts) has conceded "might have slightly shocked my grandma".

There is a long history of art vandalism associated with trenchant ideological positions. We need only recall the fascist fascination with art. More recently, the Taleban has weighed in on this issue, having demolished centuries-old Buddhas in Bamiyan.

In 1999 the British artist Chris Ofili became the target of indignant Roman Catholics, not to mention the self-righteous New York Mayor and presidential hopeful Rudolph Giuliani, over his work *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which was made up of elephant dung and pornographic

images. A retired English teacher, Dennis Heiner, became so incensed that he walked into the gallery and smeared the work with white paint. Another Serrano work, *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine, was the object of multiple attacks, leading to the closure of the show at the National Gallery of Australia in Victoria.

Although oceans of absinthe have been drained since Marcel Duchamp threw down the gauntlet and exhorted artists to break down the boundaries between art and life, these confusions still arise. Consider the rather literal reading of Duchamp's most famous sculpture: at Tate Modern in London in 2002 the jokers who had a pillow fight a few years earlier on Tracey Emin's *Bed* urinated in his *Fountain*, thus defiling a work that was once itself viewed as a defiling object.

Creativity doesn't stop with such physical reactions, either. So-called artists now "improve" on Modernist masterworks, or such as Sam

Rindy's justification last July in Avignon when she planted a lipstick-stained kiss on a white painting by Cy Twombly.

Funny? Perhaps. Clever? That's a different story. Because these impertinent acts consider themselves less as violations than as performances, they claim to address the question when does life end and art begin? Or, in the most obnoxious case of these sanctioned "interventions" — Goya's makeover by the Chapman brothers — where does one artist's work end and another's begin?

What about the graffiti artist whose work is meant to be topical and ephemeral but now fetches thousands at the auction block? Banksy's work now stands perilously close to the censor's brush.

The destruction of artwork is probably best left to the artists themselves. Like many artists, Shaw has destroyed his own work. The artist Bruce McLean says: "It's OK to smash your own art up. I have smashed mine up and blown it up

but I would never touch anyone else's, no matter how awful I thought it was."

The former art student Pete Townshend may have smashed his guitar in a fit of pique but it was also in absolute accordance with the auto-destructive art of Gustav Metzger more than 40 years ago.

But even the trendiest galleries are unamused by outside aggressors. As the gallerist Maureen Paley counsels: "When people buy a work of art we should ask them to consider their position as a custodial role. We should include care instructions with the artwork so that people look after it properly. It is, after all, our collective cultural responsibility."

An uncowed Shaw will continue to produce thought-provoking work such as his new pieces, *Man on Fire* and *Tank on Fire*, both inspired by "issues around global conflict". Rebuilding *Silenus* should take around five days. Shaw reveals that he is considering putting steel rods in the figure's arms — just in case.