

I met a traveller from an antique land  
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
 And on the pedestal these words appear:  
 "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:  
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, OZYMANDIAS, 1817

**T**he Colombian painter Fernando Botero is world-famous for his pictures of happily rotund people laughing, dancing, and partying. Portrayed with such love, Botero does justice to the tenacious spirit of a people who have been caught in the eye of a civil war for the past fifty years. In a country in which academics, writers, comedians, and innumerable innocents have been customarily massacred for making public statements about the national conflict, artists have been uniquely exempt from the guerrilla's debarring of personal expression. Botero sat atop this exalted spot, and gathered renown for his generosity and optimism. In 2001, he gave more than one hundred of his paintings, drawings, and sculptures to the old Municipal Palace in an endeavor to invest a little cultural *jouissance* into the drug- and violence-dominated culture of Medellín—his city and favored home to the major drug cartels.<sup>1</sup> The year before, he had donated his vast private collection of international art to the Casa de la Moneda museum in Bogotá,<sup>2</sup> which subsequently opened the Museo Botero to house the works. Botero has also become increasingly concerned about addressing the political chaos of Colombia, most symbolically with a huge sculpture of a dove, sited in Plaza de las Esculturas, Medellín.

It was thus a shock when the dove was blown up on June 12, 1995.

Botero's response was to keep the ruined sculpture in place and position an immaculate sculpture of another, perfect dove alongside it. Botero followed this gesture with the installation of fourteen sculptures outside the Municipal Palace. These acts of figurative defiance have been greeted with awe bordering on the religious amongst the Colombian public: so much so that Botero's sculpture of a Roman warrior has acquired magic symbolism. Its penis is becoming worn with wear from the eager touches of passers-by that seek good luck from its charm.



**S**uch acts of violence against the publicly commissioned work of art are far from new. They do, however, generate a greater sense of public horror in times of war. With the devastation of 9/11 in the United States still fresh in the global collective memory, we can all too easily visualize

<sup>1</sup> He in fact donated 105 of his paintings and drawings, 23 of his sculptures, and 21 works of European art.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Botero's own works, the Museo Botero houses an impressive collection containing, among others, works by Picasso, Renoir, Matisse, Chagall, Braque, Dali, Monet, Degas, Bacon, De Chirico, De Kooning, Balthus, Bonnard, Auerbach, and Moore.

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Rachel Whiteread, HOUSE, 1993, in the process of destruction.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ARTANGEL, LONDON

how the streets themselves became impromptu sites for memorials, shrines, and monuments, as testimonies to the atrocities publicly witnessed.

How can we come to understand acts of radical defacement, destruction, and violence against the modern image, sculpture, or edifice? Concomitantly, how do we make sense of the spontaneous and creative gestures that are born, phoenix-like, out of the displaced energy of sites of desecration and loss?

**SHIFTING SANDS** Art is no longer guaranteed to point us to noble, universal themes and sentiments, as it is fast fodder for a hungry market. Civic morality is no longer carved in stone and a considered walk through many nations' monuments could map out its erosion. No longer cherished, public statuary may remain a site of ritual remembrance observed by the dwindling older generations, but many memorials and public artworks have nevertheless become part of a landscape of forgotten ruins. The mass consumption of images and artifacts, and the ease with which we dispose of material goods and objects, contributes to this ceaselessly shifting urban landscape. While anthropological testaments to the continued ritual veneration of images abound, so too do substantive examples of the belief that, as Benjamin noted at the height of Modernism, it is in the "destruction of the work...[that] the external form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination."

Within the modern British art world, works by major artists such as Rachel Whiteread's *HOUSE*, Vong Phaophanit's *ASH AND SILK WALL*, Anthony Gormley's *TSWA 3D*, and Henry Moore's *KING AND QUEEN* have all been subjected to defacement, damage, or destruction by the public. All those with an interest in art can recite a different line from this ongoing international narrative: whether it be Rauschenberg's *ERASED DE Kooning*, the Situationist artists who jumped on Tracey Emin's *BED* and peed into R. Mutt's *FOUNTAIN*, or of the man that sabotaged David Mach's 55-metre long *POLARIS* submarine sculpture on the Thames, who having set fire to the 600 tires from which it was made, was tragically asphyxiated by the poisonous fumes released.

Interestingly, these works—each of which aroused such controversy as to have been attacked, vandalized, pissed on, and painted over—have been hugely successful, largely because of the public furor and "negative" interest they have generated. It must therefore be the case that such acts are not simply the idle or wanton actions of stray philistines at a loss for entertainment on a Saturday night. Acts of destruction upon publicly commissioned work, as these sculptures were, need to be radically reassessed.

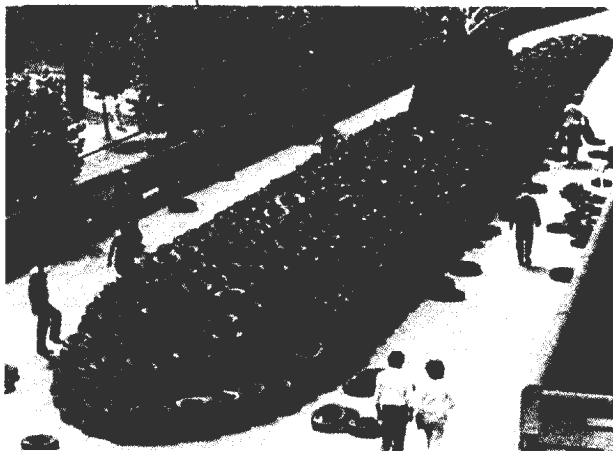
Moreover, we must examine why, each time something is threatened with destruction or actually demolished, it summons up within us as a public an *outcry* for the reinstatement of its *worth*.

**TRACING THE FOOTPRINTS** Angry words are quick to follow what are often generally perceived to be hasty and irreverent actions: indeed, it may partly be a desire for dialogue that motivates the recalcitrant mark-makers. We need only think of the universal dismay and indignation exhibited upon the destruction

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David Mach, *POLARIS*, 1983.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GOODWOOD  
SCULPTURE PARK



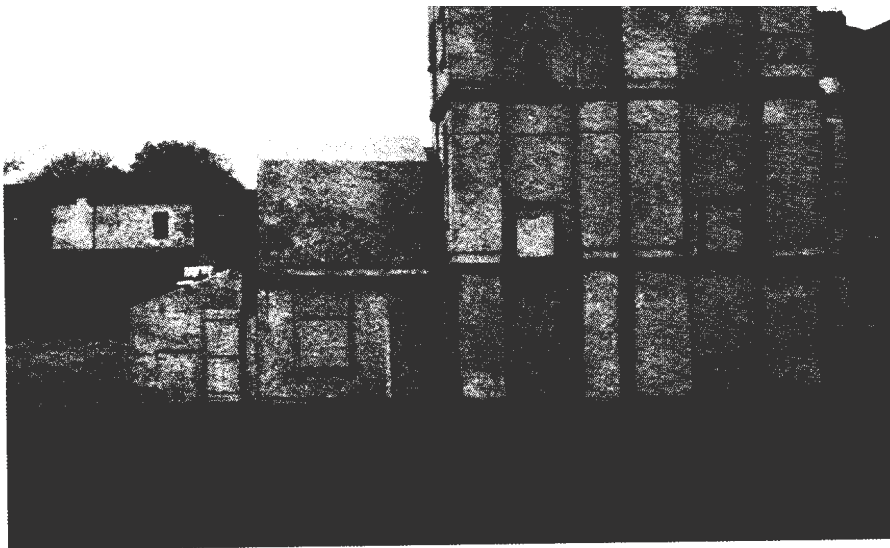
of the Buddhist sculptures in the Bamiyan district of Afghanistan by the fundamentalist Taliban regime. The United Nations Council for Cultural Affairs condemned the obliteration of the statues as “a true act of cultural barbarism,” an unanimous sentiment that was echoed on a global scale. Once the Taliban had been toppled, plans were quickly afoot to “rebuild” the sculptures.

A similar protectionism is played out on a smaller scale towards the memorial and nationalist hub of Trafalgar Square in London, which is routinely scrubbed clean of the “scourge” of graffiti, as are the pigeon droppings from the resin skylight of the city, Whiteread’s temporary installation, PLINTH.

Our consensual attitude displays a notable ambivalence towards what we eagerly applaud and what we righteously condemn.<sup>3</sup> Bow Council ordered the destruction of Whiteread’s celebrated sculpture HOUSE in 1994, a controversial move that was, however, welcomed by a large sector of the general public. Yet there is more than an obvious parallel of intention between Whiteread’s pieces and the Taliban’s concern to rid Afghan culture of the representational image. This wish moves Judaism, Protestantism, and Islam to converge upon a point of faith, at least in theory, given that they are all mobilized by a mistrust of the graven image. The same caution was evident in modernist ideology after Adorno’s statement that there could be no poetry after Auschwitz, that all endeavours to create would fall short. Postwar art did indeed retreat into the non-representational.

Defacement is more than simply a question of iconoclasm, however. When the public chooses to chisel away at a publicly sited sculpture or throw ink at a work of art (other than for reasons of wanting to take a bit home or scrawl their names upon it), something of great cultural significance is happening. Some response has been elicited which is noteworthy, whether it’s a question of political argument or an expression of judgement about a work’s aesthetic merit. What is being witnessed is a public engagement with art which mimics, unconsciously perhaps, the way in which artists make things with an awareness that others will follow behind them, will pick up on and embellish their work, or will want to tear it apart and make something else altogether. Such acts may thus be imitative of the regenerative industry of art, although we may simply interpret them as sabotage.

There is a case to be presented that individual acts perpetrated against esteemed sculpture thus need to be incorporated into the writing of the contemporary history of art. We are already familiar with the stories of the Puritan destruction of Christian idols, the demolition of Catholic iconography during the Reformation, and the Islamic obliteration of Hindu images in the Gujarat temple. An alternative, complementary telling of a history of art needs to be composed which places such examples within the trajectory Arthur Danto briefly traces of “incinerated art: from the destroyed icons of Byzantium to the bonfire of the vanities ignited by Savonarola to the iconoclastic flames of the Dutch reformation.” For they demonstrate how both artist and audience have always been mutually engaged in the constitution of the art object. Art history is littered with examples of what Danto calls the “impish spirit of sabotage,” shaping the path of art at the point at which technical features or developments become recognizable “styles.”



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Rachel Whiteread, HOUSE, 1993.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ARTANGEL, LONDON

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Isabel Hilton notes that although the Taliban’s justification is “religious, the oldest and most common excuse for the destruction of art created by rival faiths, ... it is also true that few countries are innocent of past zealotry and iconoclasm. Genghis Khan’s forces destroyed Bamiyan in 1221, despite the fact that [he] himself was to become one of history’s less likely Buddhists; British forces demolished most of the fifteenth century mosque in Musallah in Afghanistan in 1885 and in China, temples and monasteries were demolished during the Great Leap Forward.” “From some perspectives,” she claims, “history seems like one long catalogue of destruction by one tribe of the treasures of another” (my emphasis), in THE GUARDIAN, March 7th, 2001.