

Bloom & Decay: Beyond Opulence

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Abstract:

This thesis is an examination of both the term and anti-art concept that I've come to call *post-opulence*, as well as the contextualizing of its place among other previous attempts toward anti-art forms. It argues opulence as the intention and means by which we manifest, cast out, and assert objects of production into systems of promised value and preservation. However, this preservation happening through service to its own greater heroism schemes. Lastly, through the scope of iconoclasm, post-opulence reevaluates the operations of such institutionalized objects (icons) and what they become following their destruction.

Throughout the western art canon, destruction both *in* and *of* art have served as actions of protest and direct criticisms of art as an institution. By drawing an historical thread through twentieth-century dadaism, the destruction of recognizable form in abstract expressionism, and the later auto-destructive art movement, I argue that these iconoclastic attempts often failed to genuinely challenge both the social and institutional ideologies at the time. Instead, these movements perpetuated such institutional ideology and heroism projects through the processes of preservation, monetization, and iconization. This project will offer examples in which post-opulence addresses such issues leading into the contemporary, while encompassing the practical, philosophical, and aesthetic character of a reclaimed iconoclastic practice.

Key Words:

Icon, Iconoclasm, Destruction, Aesthetics

Methodologies

A number of primary and secondary sources have been both reviewed and cited in formulating this thesis and the term post-opulence. These include published works of various destructive practices within the western canon, aesthetic theories of anti-art forms and movements, critique of institutional/museological practice, and theories of subject/object relationship within an art context. Cited works include Gustav Metzger's piece titled *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art*. In addition, these documents will be used to better historicize post-opulence in relationships with earlier anti-art practices. Lastly, to better contextualize definitions and following terms, this document will make reference to a number of nineteenth-century theoretical texts coinciding with its chronological structure.

Introduction:

Propagation in the Wasteland

Memories announce themselves as degrading reels of film, playing over and over, with subtle variations depending upon how forcefully we try to change the moments long-since experienced. However, even in the best-imagined outcomes, reality molds the mind back to the inevitable result of the things that have already come to pass. So much of our early lives, simple joys, and ignorance-based bliss is lost into the void of the mind and its need to distinguish, pasts, presents, and futures¹.

In writing on the Destruction of Art Symposium, a month-long symposium focused on the exhibition of destructive and destroyed works that took place in 1966 London, Art historian Kristine Stiles describes destruction *in* art as not being the same as destruction *of* art. Moreover, she went on to write that the destruction *in* art addresses the negative aspects of both social and political institutions and manifests as an attack on the traditional identity of the visual arts themselves². Participating artists such as Yoko Ono, Robin Page, Barbara Steveni, Gustav Metzger were responding to their individual overarching philosophies of anti-art/destruction in the “form” of ephemeral art objects and performance-based works. However, despite the united theme of destruction, it represented a single moment without further conceptual collaboration, produced manifesto, nor further exhibition. Though the symposium itself

¹ Self. Earlier notes. 2016.

² Stiles, K. (2005). The story of the Destruction in Art Symposium and the “DIAS affect”, (41-65). Retrieved from https://web.duke.edu/art/stiles/KristineStilesDIAS_Affect-2.pdf

was formulated by the artist Gustav Metzger, who coined the term “Auto-Destructive Art” seven years prior, it would seem that final meditations of both destruction and decay as separate from any existing canon following the month-long event would end there.

Eight years later, in the 1974 essay “Theory of the Avant-Garde,” Peter Bürger presents a similar problem, more directly asking the question as to how the development of art and literature could be reconstructed within a bourgeois society. Moreover, he theorizes that the conditions of true self-criticism derived from the disappearance of favorable tension between the demands of art as an institution and the content of the individual work³. This earlier question alludes to a later point made in the piece in which definitions of individual works are thus not made through the autonomy of the object itself but rather solely through socially institutionalized investigation. The institution of art, then presenting itself as the system of production and distribution of the prevailing ideas that dictate an object's reception of what we would consider to be Art. Dadaism had poised itself as a radical movement fifty years prior within the European avant-garde in its manifested criticism of art as an institution⁴. The movement, in fact, challenged nineteenth-century aestheticism and art objects through the self-criticism of art, or rather, the theoretical destruction *of* Art within the realm of the institution. The Dadaists were among the first to introduce a means of subverting capitalist ideas

³ Bürger, Peter. 1984. Theory of the avant-garde. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1974. Pg. 32

⁴ Bürger, Peter. 1984. Theory of the avant-garde. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1974. Pg. 22

directly within the western art canon, while also destroying traditional comprehension of what we would call aesthetic experience. The paradox in the base ideas of an anti-art itself resides in the fact that such concepts have long since been inducted into institutional canon, and by extension, the greater art market. As recognized by Gustav Metzger, “They did not destroy enough.”⁵

An art object, even in a Dadaist manner, acting as a signifier to nothing but itself and the meaningless nature of the modern world, was still left with meaning by its physical presence in the facet of a world it was attempting to critique. The hypocritical nature of this relationship between anti-aesthetics and institutional art in fact created the platform for future artists like Andy Warhol and new methods of the envelopment of aesthetics into commercialism. In the case of the ready-made, as the object was removed from the traditionally understood aesthetic experience, the mass production of objects that were able to maintain their ‘original luxury character’⁶ could now circulate as a niche example of benign critique. Paul Mattick describes the process in this way:

Nothing more clearly reveals the logic of the functioning of the artistic field than the fate of these apparently radical attempts at subversion. Because they expose the act of artistic creation to a mockery already annexed to the artistic tradition by Duchamp, they are immediately converted into artistic “acts,” recorded as such and thus consecrated and celebrated by the makers of taste. Art cannot reveal the truth about art

⁵ Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, auto-destructive art*. oracle@workfortheeyetodo, London, 1996.

⁶ Mattick, Paul. *Art in it's time: The Aesthetics of Anti-Aesthetics*. Taylor and Francis Group. New York & London UK. 1991). Pg130

without snatching it away again by turning the revelation into an artistic event⁷.

In Antony Hudek's *The Object*, objecthood is understood as a *thing* that has obtained verified value through the perception of the individual or a conformed and collective intellect. In both cases, objects become *subjects* themselves, self-alienating from autonomy. Later in the text, Hudek addresses the relationship between this valued and venerated thing as being made an object in relationship to the specifically thinking subject⁸. However, arguably in both cases, the *object* is nothing more than a thing, oppressed with meaning and extensions of a subjects' own ego and narcissism. Consider an art object. In the process of making, a cumulation of things that would have otherwise been overlooked (in the most general sense, where one does not actively seek the particularly used material, or in the more ideal situation, in which the material is sourced other than otherwise commodified or sentimental means), suddenly becomes an object. That object then becomes one of subjective perceptions by a larger body. The art object, in that particular moment of exhibition, transforms into a mirror in which this primary subject observes and makes reflected judgment on a now secondary subject, the maker. The object itself then operates as if both hiding its own past thingness and intent, in ambiguous form, meaning, and/or *Use Value*⁹. However, as the

⁷ Mattick, Paul. *Art in it's time: The Aesthetics of Anti-Aesthetics*. Taylor and Francis Group. New York & London UK. 1991). Pg130

⁸ Hudek, Antony. *The Object*. Whitechapel Gallery. London UK. 2014. Pg. 17

⁹ concept in classical political economy and Marxian economics. It refers to the tangible features of a commodity (a tradeable object) which can satisfy some human requirement, want or need, or which serves a useful purpose.

object becomes further commodified through institution, original *thinghood* transcends to proposed magnificence.

While opulence often has (understandably) more association with physical tokens of wealth, this can be arguably more abstracted in that opulence is the way in which we manifest, cast out, and assert our productions of grandeur into a system that demands it in exchange for the false promise of value (what Ernst Becker will call “heroism” ahead) in the greater and perversely commodified heroic machine¹⁰. As an example, Banksy has made a career as the champion street artist in their anonymity and in their works’ critique of capitalism and other inherent ideas of what was our contemporary. However, despite what pieces were cut or spectacle produced, their capital is still granted sensationalism. Of the market and by the market, their work fails to break things down with any proposal of solution to posed arguments, settling for tongue-in-cheek banality that functions as the ideal and profitable “shake-up.”

post-opulence, then, introduces unpredictability in material presence rather than finding comfort in the stable image or object. It aims, first, to reveal the sought ideal and iconic states as nothing more than subjected reflections of questionable institutional/social standards (*Destruction in Art*). Secondly, it actively creates afflictions and ambivalence toward a conventional aesthetic through the destruction of the art object (*Destruction of Art*). It is a theory aimed at dismantling and disrupting the

¹⁰ Becker, Ernst. *The Denial of Death*. The Free Press: a Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, NY. 1973.

deconstruction/reconstruction process while conveying existing points of resolution between. Though the relationship to the object or its “making” is similar to that of earlier destructionist practice, it continues to seek a space between a material’s thingness and objecthood, and remains uncommitted to itself. post-opulence highlights the initial investment in an idealized form, the projection of what one wants to be there, to then reduce the object back to a state of material and denied recovery. Moreover, it explores a struggle that ensues between the formerly idealized art object (Icon) and the new variable form revealed through a process of deconstruction and decay. post-opulence rejects notions of value and stagnation in a commodified system and it operates as institutional disruption in that it consistently makes reference to both actions and signals of changed circumstances and time.

The Reality of Decay

Every moment of our life belongs to the present only for a moment; then it belongs forever to the past. Every evening we are poorer by a day. We would perhaps grow frantic at the sight of this ebbing away of our short span of time were we not secretly conscious in the profoundest depths of our being that we share in the inexhaustible well of eternity, out of which we can forever draw new life and renewed time¹¹.

In his essay, *On the Vanity of Existence* (1851), Arthur Schopenhauer describes our existence as a fruitless struggle amidst a life dictated by instability and confusion. To

¹¹ Schopenhauer, Arthur. *On the Vanity of Existence*. 1851.

Schopenhauer, the living body is a dedicated mechanism to strife in the pursuit of a recognized and sustainable present of satisfaction. However, this journey will inevitably end in vain as that which was meant to embody a lasting existence would not have non-being as its preordained goal¹². In other words, despite the reality that most all things are written to eventually decay, there still remains the quest for sustained purpose or stable content. Additionally, it's in our subjective reality during the process of life that such definitions become skewed and distorted through culture and institution.

post-opulence, then, is eventually interested in both the exploration and disentombing of humanity's rebellion toward the implied sustainability of a dominating commodified society. This being said, the visual experience should not be reinforced just to seek the supplementation of permanent images or icons, but go on to embrace the decaying nature of its meaning as well. While representation is inherently mimetic of reality, Modernist ideology called for the delusion of it and is thus much more dangerous.

Where the physicality of the made form is a manifestation of tangible truth, paintings manipulate the texture of the mind. To quote Harold Rosenberg, "Art as action rests on the enormous assumption that the artist accepts as real only that which he is in the process of creating." What could've been unknowingly hinted by him at the time, it is the potential for narcissism in self-referential types of art that creates a volatile iconization

¹² Schopenhauer, Arthur. *On the Vanity of Existence*. 1851.

of itself in the form of artistic commodity¹³. Good art is overdetermined by the economy while external society is abstracted away.

The Icon

*'It doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to form a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count.'*¹⁴

An icon is representative of something otherworldly. It is by extension defined as an object or image deployed to aid devotion/action toward larger systems of personal value. Secondly, an icon is defined separately as a representative symbol or as being worthy of veneration. Even in such surface definitions, there's a redundancy in both definitional cases, as an icon serves as nothing more than a manifested access point to something perceived as greater than the self. Whether in a composition, place of

¹³ Benitez, J. M. (2012). Ideology and Iconoclasm: The Image in Mid-twentieth-century American Art Criticism. *International Journal of the Image*, 2(1), 37–46. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asu&AN=86933028&site=ehost-live>

¹⁴ Becker, Ernst. *The Denial of Death*. The Free Press: a Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, NY. 1973. Pg.5

worship, or in our pockets, we imbue faith and define reality via iconic vehicles of reconciliation and promises of fixed access to the infinite.

In *The Denial of Death*, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker states that the human mind is occupied by both anxiety and despair as we meditate upon impending demise. As humans, we seek a buffer or antidote to this truth in adopting a greater urge to heroism — an application of significance to one’s own existence¹⁵. However, while certain imagined heroisms are inaccessible to most, we find ways of seeking heroism in our daily routines (i.e. work, religion, politics, relationships). This heroism is short lived in that it's destined for failure. This is because the cosmic significance of the individual person is nonexistent. Additionally, we subscribe to what is ultimately the illusion of permanent meaning. As religion was the once-prominent means of establishing this illusion of greater individual significance, the institution in this form began to lose its hold as modernity began to supplement this need via a cultural heroism defined by its respective culture.

It’s in the latter that we begin to see the rise of cultural heroes (or *icons*) and the creation of heroic machines. These apparatus, being of greater influencing institutions (i.e. art, religion, and politics) dictate the rhetoric that the average individual can only hope to fold into the illusion of being a part of the greater heroic movement. Again, this machine is being directed and represented by the culture in which it grows, for better or

¹⁵ Becker, Ernst. *The Denial of Death*. The Free Press: a Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, NY. 1973.

worse. Becker asserts that this quest for cultural heroism is the most actualized form of heroism that an individual could hope to achieve. There are rare instances, however, that Becker coined as 'genuine heroism.'

Applying such a context once again to this idea of the physical icon, the Post-Opulent role is that of the institutional iconoclast and the introduction of an aestheticized anti-heroism. In that while one accepts that we are indeed subject to the individual limitations of the unconscious drives to cultural heroism, the objects and images we produce in this world are fleeting offerings to the two facets of our present reality: being and non-being. Moreover, by redirecting the productions of oneself away from satiating the cultural/institutional beast in favor of starving it, one may produce an aesthetic theory or practice similar to that which can be viewed as a genuine heroism. For Becker, genuine heroism refers to a small population of people that do not require any form of heroic illusion to live, who can face the impossible situation of living that we find ourselves in.

Final Notes: Anti-Heroism & Reverence of the Non-Opulent Object:

In the 1995 piece by John F. Schumaker, *The Corruption of Reality*, when an individual is in need of order in a chaotic system, they must establish and maintain an unjustified or artificial order. Schumaker goes on to assert that this develops into a second system of operation that begins to eliminate competing data from the individual consciousness.

Thus, the ordered institution becomes dependent on a social body of individual dissociation¹⁶. The example Schumaker provides in regard to the way in which artificial reality takes hold is the institution of religion. Much like hypnosis, such institutions produce a state of complacency via disassociation and supplementation, through a reconstructive process of suggestion¹⁷. Object and icon begin to then form as waypoints, or rather, as gaslights along a darkened street, leading the collective consciousness down a path laid down by unknown entities that claim such passages safe. He considers the miraculous:

Some worthwhile examples come to mind that would reveal the bridge between “hypnotic” and religious behavior. Consider the recently publicized miracle that took place when a figure of Christ on the cross began to shed tears. The cross was situated high against the front wall of the church, too high in fact for anyone actually to see the drops of water firsthand. Yet a great percentage of people who visited the church were convinced wholeheartedly that tears were being shed by the figure. At a later point, zoom cameras were able to show that there were no changes to the figure’s eyes, even while people reported seeing the tears. // They stared at the eyes for long periods of time, which had a trance-inducing effect due to the visual monotony. At the same time, the staring caused eye fatigue and some inevitable perceptual variations // These effects were then interpreted in relation to believers’ original suggestion, namely, that Christ’s eyes would.’¹⁸

Here is one example of an iconic object fulfilling the role as a vessel of prescribed imaginative illusion and suggested magnificence, or rather, opulence. The maker venerates the thing to object with meaning and direction toward a subject, and the

¹⁶ Schumaker, John F. *The Corruption of Reality*, Prometheus Books. Buffalo, NY. 1995. Pg.34

¹⁷ Schumaker, John F. *The Corruption of Reality*, Prometheus Books. Buffalo, NY. 1995. Pg.81

¹⁸ Schumaker, John F. *The Corruption of Reality*, Prometheus Books. Buffalo, NY. 1995. Pg.81

object then becomes a mimetic representation and *reflection* of the once subjected target. This new observer, with prescribed reason, then participates in the cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning. In short, an object and the concept of the meaning of itself mean little compared to the amount that the institution as a whole can dictate.

There is no art without ourselves, or acknowledgement of the lack of it.

Chapter I

On the Destruction of Ideology: Post-Opulence & Critique in Early Iconoclasm

If all that changes slowly may be explained by life, all that changes quickly is explained by fire.

Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and it is universal.¹⁹

Icon as object have always served as powerful means of instilling pillars of power. While we may think of the word *icon* in solely Western terms, such as digital representation of files or in relationship to objects of Christianity, this use of object or image as a vessel to areas beyond our conceptual understanding is a cross-cultural phenomenon that has spanned throughout time. From the objects of polytheism and pagan-era deity worship, to contemporary vessels such as photographs that capture and represent memory, all fall within the theoretical characterization of being memetic extensions (or rather, physical reflections) of the collected imagination through material.

In this sense, the iconoclast or destroyer (in terms of being an antithesis to the “maker”) inadvertently still holds a specific aesthetic sensibility and potential to create a work that reveals an opposite/subverted reality than the initial object implies. Aesthetically and socially speaking, we now exist in a time where it can be argued that iconoclasm has the ability to present itself as evidence of progressive victory over historically problematic institutions. It could be argued that iconoclasm, as the designated outlier to

¹⁹ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Beacon Press. Boston, MA, 1938. Pg. 7

disrupt mimetic representation of both the visual and conceptual, then could be argued to better be described as a conceptual construct that has evolved in relation to an auto-destructive culture, that in fact created the environment that fosters its own self-destruction through the inclination of self-preservation. Reframing the negative associations of the destruction of icon based on Byzantine era victors and influences, iconoclasm overall serves as both a powerful aesthetic strategy and political tool²⁰. The legitimacy of the destruction of the icon has found both evolution and intersection within whole practices of sociopolitical life and contemporary aesthetics. In the French Revolution, when iconoclasm found its most drastic shifts in narrative following the period in which it was defined solely by its religious targets, the revolutionaries destroyed artworks and portraits of the wealthy as these symbolized the luxury, vanity, and opulence of the aristocracy. However, as the social valuation of art itself began to grow, these revolutionaries evolved once more this concept of iconoclasm and created new techniques of destroying and transforming symbolic meaning through the process of renaming, rededication, and the full removal from sites where display and interpretation could be institutionally controlled. As an example, revolutionaries during the period pulled down and destroyed a statue of King Louis XV located in the Place de la Révolution (now “Concorde”), which until that point carried his name instead²¹. This site would also become the location in which his successor Louis XVI would eventually be guillotined.

²⁰ O'neil, megan e. 1,., reinders, eric3, brubaker, leslie4, clay, richard4, & boldrick, stacy4. (2014). the new iconoclasm. *Material Religion*, 10(3), 377–385.

²¹ Idzerda, Stanley J. (1954). "Iconoclasm during the French Revolution". *The American Historical Review*. 60/1 (1): 13–26. doi:10.2307/1842743. JSTOR 1842743.

Hugo Ball, a key theorist and practitioner of the Dadaists in early twentieth century Zurich, took this concept of reframing in the realm of iconoclasm by motivating the Dada movement through complex thinking on language, philosophy, theology, mysticism, history, and politics²². Not only did the views of Dada contradict Christian mysticism, but they characterized similar institutions (such as the museum) as “outdated,” hierarchical repositories of power²³. Dada was at an intersection between iconoclasm, anarchism, and aesthetic experience. Moreover, Ball viewed the iconoclastic movements as being a singular mold of both religious and secular, although its participants would claim one or the other. Dada was responding to aestheticization of late nineteenth-century art, which itself was the aristocratic bourgeoisie response to industrialization. While the use of the term “iconoclasm” in Ball’s essays was in relationship to a historical “Bildersturm,”²⁴ otherwise known as the sixteenth-century’s Great Iconoclasm during Europe’s Protestant Reformation, it was treated as an important means of force in political conflicts that continued to resonate into the twentieth-century.

In elucidating modernism, Ball thought that “Because man is unable to escape the concrete, all abstraction, as an attempt to manage without the image, leads only to an

²² Lewer, Debbie. Hugo Ball, Iconoclasm and the origins of Dada in Zurich. 2009, Oxford University Press. Pg. 17-35

²³ Lewer, Debbie. Hugo Ball, Iconoclasm and the origins of Dada in Zurich. 2009, Oxford University Press. Pg. 17-35

²⁴ Lewer, Debbie. Hugo Ball, Iconoclasm and the origins of Dada in Zurich. 2009, Oxford University Press. Pg. 17-35

impoverishment, a dilution of, a surrogate for the linguistic process.”²⁵ Additionally, he noted that “Abstraction breeds arrogance; it makes men appear the same as or similar to God (even if only in illusion)”²⁶. In Ball’s analysis, the museum presents itself as the new church, supplanting the illusion of free thought within the confines and narrative of the space it’s in. Jason Farago picks up this Dada thread for the contemporary art world:

The art museum has supplanted the church as the pinnacle of architectural ambition, but a more curious ecclesiastical shift may be taking place inside the museum’s walls. These days we frequently use religious language when talking about art. We make ‘pilgrimages’ to museums or to landmarks of public art in far-off locales. We experience ‘transcendence’ before major paintings or large-scale installations. Especially important works – Mona Lisa at the Louvre, most famously – are often displayed in their own niches rather than in historical presentations, all the better for genuflection. What is the busiest day of the week for most contemporary art museums? That would be Sunday: the day we used to reserve for another house of worship²⁷.

In his essay, *Functions of the Museum (1973)*, Daniel Buren likewise describes a similar perception of the museum as being a privileged place of retention with three specific realms of function: In the aesthetic, economic, and mystical. First, it frames itself as the central viewpoint from which to consume the narratives of the collection, under the guise of individual emphasis or freedom from agenda in curated relationships that are imagined to exist between the intersections of story, reality, and intent. Secondly, the museum removes objects from the commonplace, creating an inclusive value system

²⁵ Lewer, Debbie. Hugo Ball, Iconoclasm and the origins of Dada in Zurich. 2009, Oxford University Press. Pg. 17-35

²⁶ Lewer, Debbie. Hugo Ball, Iconoclasm and the origins of Dada in Zurich. 2009, Oxford University Press. Pg. 17-35

²⁷ Farago, Jason. Why Museums are the New Churches.

<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150716-why-museums-are-the-new-churches>. 7/15/2015.

based on the privileged/selected. Thirdly, it perpetuates a self-reflecting myth of omnipotent power over what is consumed as “Art” in both its implied promise and intention of self-preservation. This preservation, perpetuating the idealistic notion of becoming eternal²⁸ within it.

The museum has been tasked with a culture’s protection against time itself. It is an artificial space, ‘granting it an appearance of immortality which serves a remarkably well discourse which the prevalent bourgeois ideology attaches to it’²⁹. The museum presents itself as self-evident, all while protecting itself and its own fragility through the collection of voice and gesture. This collection, becoming where art is ‘born and buried in the museum’s ability to create the space for simplification.’³⁰ The two roles of the collection present as either a silencing of the many or the embedding of value upon the privileged few.

²⁸ Buren, Daniel. Functions of the Museum. Theories of Contemporary Art (Hertz, Richard). Prentice Hall Inc. Englewood Cliffs NJ. 1973. Pg.190

²⁹ Buren, Daniel. Functions of the Museum. Theories of Contemporary Art (Hertz, Richard). Prentice Hall Inc. Englewood Cliffs NJ. 1973. Pg.191

³⁰ Buren, Daniel. Functions of the Museum. Theories of Contemporary Art (Hertz, Richard). Prentice Hall Inc. Englewood Cliffs NJ. 1973. Pg.191

Chapter II

Destructive Nature: Modernism, Auto-Destructive Art, and Post-Opulence

In the Western canon, following the end of World War II, iconoclasm via the abstract form (i.e. Tachisme and abstract expressionism) became the predominant means of cultural expression within a mass episode of cultural forgetting within the Western world. That being, there were no means of both accurately embodying and aestheticizing the horrors of the post-war world that remained grounded in full essence of its reality and truth³¹. However, abstract expressionism proposed a new spiritual language in the destruction of recognizable imagery in favor of the abstract form where reality was even further removed and that unpleasantness successfully buried. Catastrophe and its sediments are made both palatable and distant, creating a cognitive distance as a kind of means of not looking, alienation, and disassociation³².

Auto-destructive art (1959) was acutely concerned with the problems of the repressed aggressions of and toward the individual, as well as those within the greater society. auto-destructive art had operated against a system that was viewed by its founder, Gustav Metzger, as being the maker of its own destruction, by means of responding to

³¹ Munson, M. M. (2017). Iconoclasm as Catharsis: Anselm Kiefer and the Seeds of Memory. *International Journal of Arts Theory & History*, 12(2), 27–39. Retrieved from

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asu&AN=129509648&site=ehost-live>

³² Hughes, J. (2002). Destroy & reclaim: artists and disaster sites. *New Art Examiner*, 29(5), 66–73. Retrieved from

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asu&AN=505026126&site=ehost-live>

WWII and the increased industrialization of war and nuclear armament. In three separate manifestos, he went on to criticize privileged institutions and their dominion of nature as a tangible entity and, in more metaphysical forms, in relationship to the greater society. Metzger viewed people as vessels of innate, unresolved, and suppressed aggressions within themselves. He argued that this predisposition toward destruction served as a critical threat to the continuation of the institutional illusion of balance and control. It is for this reason that he rationalized that due to this conflicting unconscious allure, any art celebrating this (destructive) pleasure would be quickly rejected³³, Additionally, within a culture that both appropriates and consumes the aesthetic and moral principles of the world would be counter. Mass media, as an example, serves us daily reminders of the realities of our modern day capacity for destruction, disruption, and decay.

The exhibition '*Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990's*' is an example, organized by curator Paul Schimmel of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. It offers some vision into the earlier notions of Destruction *in* art versus *of* art, in relation to the display of violence in the exhibition. While the exhibit was an aggressive/violent disruption of the exhibition space itself, with its contrast to the Los Angeles tradition of light/open space being a key point of criticism³⁴, it brought into question the role of the curated sensationalism of violent display. Moreover, it inquires what that means in a

³³ Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature, auto-destructive art.* oracle@workfortheeyetodo, London, 1996. Pg. 26

³⁴ Muchnic, Suzanne. *ART: Public Warm, Critics Cool Toward 'Helter Skelter'*. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-04-26-ca-1293-story.html>. 4/26/1992

system still tethered to such social violence yet wielding commentary on the horrors of banality. The question as to whether or not art object can both accurately describe reality and catalyze destruction as an autonomous entity is one I put before post-opulence to answer through the reclamation of destruction within the isolated *infrathin*³⁵ moment between a prescribed destructive process and its inherent aesthetic manifestation outside of intent or control.

The contemporary ways of viewing of this progression/interaction between institution and “finalized” art object is evocative of Jean Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality³⁶, in which reality itself is formed from an endless reproduction of the real. The real vanishes into a relationship of equivalence, indifference, tothen the extinction of the original³⁷. The way in which mass production has shaped our way of viewing has both destroyed and altered the relationships we have with our own experienced reality. Additionally, it has created a perceived hierarchy of these two visual forms of completion and degradation into two opposing icons of status³⁸, as mass production and replication continues to obscure autonomous intention and meaning in what is chosen to be consumed or seen.

Where auto-destructive art and post-opulence diverge is in the intention toward the

³⁵ Infrathin: is a concept coined by Marcel Duchamp. When asked for a conceptual definition of the term "infrathin," Marcel Duchamp replied that the notion is impossible to define, "one can only give examples of it:" i.e. The warmth of a seat (which has just been left) is infrathin.

³⁶ Hyperreality, in semiotics and postmodernism, is an inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced postmodern societies.

³⁷ Berger, Arthur A. (2012), *Media Analysis Techniques*, USA: Sage Publications Inc.

³⁸ Samir, N. (2013). Iconoclasm: The loss of iconic image in art and visual communication. *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*, 11(3), 335–341. [https://doi.org/10.1386/tear.11.3.335pass:\[\]1](https://doi.org/10.1386/tear.11.3.335pass:[]1)

intimate actualization of a specific set of ethical and political ideals, rather than solely becoming a grand or absolute display of them. Auto-destructive art was interested in complex and large-scale forms, with somewhat hypocritical (ironic?) relations to the art market itself. The practice is quoted as always needing ‘something tougher’³⁹ in its goal of being a ‘constructive’ force in society⁴⁰. Auto-destructive art manifested destruction in the form of violence, expelling through force of theoretical or immediate action, such as the earlier performances of melting nylon sheets with acid⁴¹. post-opulence is based on the passing of time rather than a specific and complex manipulation of it through chemical means, and more interested in the actual practice of relinquishing form rather than the performance of it. Where the theory of auto-destructive art was an attack on the capitalist art market through performance in conjunction with material form, post-opulence is a rejection of the idealized or fixed state of material form, as well as a rejection of institutional convention and the iconization happening within it.

Aside from acknowledged relationships to dada, auto-destructive art successfully lacked being a complete theory. However, the work of auto-destructive art began to be defined by its scientific motivations, idealizing the future machine-based experiences “that we need”⁴². It found manifestation (or lack thereof) not only in the physical practice of

³⁹ Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature*, auto-destructive art. oracle@workfortheeyetodo, London, 1996. Pg. 34

⁴⁰ Metzger, Gustav. *Damaged Nature*, auto-destructive art. oracle@workfortheeyetodo, London, 1996. Pg. 36

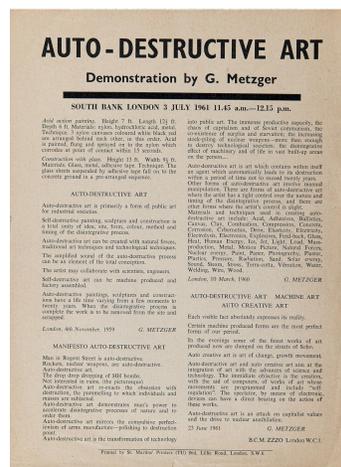
⁴¹ Using a modified paintbrush, Metzger applied a hydrochloric acid solution to fabric. As the Nylon came into contact with the acid it immediately dissolved, creating a swirling glue-like coating on a panel of glass as Metzger slowly became visible through it.

⁴² Wilson, Andrew. *Gustav Metzger’s Auto-Destructive/Auto-Creative Art: An Art of Manifesto*, 1959-1969. Third Text, Vol 2, Issue 2. London UK. 2008

deconstructing works, destruction *of* art, but also by means of the manifesto/lecture format during presentations in the vein of the proposed theoretical destruction *in* it. Much like post-opulence, auto-destructive art worked as a synthesis of the appreciation of the aesthetic values of destruction and public/collective engagement. Specifically to post-opulence, the lecture/manifesto took form in events which had been informally called simply 'burnings', which will be addressed later⁴³.

Final Thoughts: Modernism's Failure:

The overall criticism of auto-destructive art in relation to post-opulence is in the synthetic and violent texture of the auto-destructive movement itself.



(Left) Gutav Metzger performing his Acid Painting Demonstrations, (Right) Image of an Auto-Destructive Art manifesto that would be distributed.

⁴³ See Page 40: *Trial by Ordeal & Reverie: Meeting Fire with Fire*

As a continual modernization process provided the Western world with a means of dealing with the traumas of war and its disasters, it additionally left open the questions surrounding who truly carries the authority over the conventions of art and its institutional value. Clement Greenberg, a prominent art critic of the mid-twentieth century, adopted a new iconoclastic ideology and championed abstract expressionism within the Western canon. Abstract expressionism created an standard and climate for the privileged to foster the grand modernist narrative, in that it demanded institutionally scoped critical analyses, interpretations, and informed opinions⁴⁴. Here, iconoclasm has found itself appropriated as a tool of illusionary progress in the form of the abstract. Illusionary in its failure in this form to provide a genuine challenge against normative social ideology at the time.

The modern studio itself can be seen to conform to the limitations of the neutral space, in which the hope is to be selected, exhibited, and sold. While on the one hand the studio was a private space, a heroic space, the studio was and remains a space with the intention of convenience for the organizer's, curator's, or exhibitor's own designs⁴⁵. Institution provides an easy to understand space, in which its own values characterize the studio into a described, 'boutique where we find ready-to-wear-art'⁴⁶; tailored and fitted to the market's needs. Said institution abstracting that which challenges between its space of production and its space of exhibition and distribution.

⁴⁴ Benitez, J. M. (2012). Ideology and Iconoclasm: The Image in Mid-twentieth-century American Art Criticism. *International Journal of the Image*, 2(1), 36

⁴⁵ Buren, Daniel. *Functions of the Studio*. The MIT Press. 1979. pg.51-58

⁴⁶ Buren, Daniel. *Functions of the Studio*. The MIT Press. 1979. pg.51-58

Abstract expressionism was viewed as elitist, as its initial collector base largely consisted of those within the political center. However, still being an object of question and scandal to those on the outside, it was in this kept social division that it would seem the case that such institutional powers (which were and continue to be problematic and white-male dominant) would continue to provide answers to relevancy and higher meanings. To that point, and the institutionalization of art itself in the development of higher conceptual frameworks belonging to those who can access it, has transformed art into a vessel (or icon) of a privileged order. The concepts and aesthetics of the artistic field grew in relationship with the post-war period, which today are still taught as fundamental knowledge. However, abstract expressionism eventually removed a necessary conflict between an “advanced art” and the dominant culture⁴⁷, in that it kept alive the social and political norms of the west, and thus became an icon in both its material reality and lack of image.

Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power:

Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. Instead of being made of natural materials, such as marble, granite, or other kinds of rock, the new monuments are made of artificial materials, plastic, chrome, and electric light. They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages. They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in

⁴⁷ Paul Mattick. Art in its Time: Theories and Practices of modern aesthetics. 119-137

*representing the long spaces of centuries. Both past and future are placed into an objective present*⁴⁸

Minimalism acted as a theoretical reversal of power relations between individual values and those of society⁴⁹. Whereas in reality, in its compositions, minimalism represented authority. It not only embodied a prevailing social authority, but also the currency of power of the social patriarch. It also made a case for an inherent discourse of implied power that was present in minimalist work, contextualized by inscribed problematic meaning⁵⁰. These included implications of industry, representations mimicking the rhetoric of a perceived dominant figure (the male), and a visual violence/aggression that would be directed toward the viewer and as a complete occupation of communal space.

In Anna Chave's essay *Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power (1990)*, Robert Morris's work is described as being reminiscent of "carceral images of discipline and punishment." The images themselves portray imprisonment or and repression, and Chave goes on to comment that even in Morris's writings, he was more interested in power than the countering of the current political/social context of the time. As an example, the Morris piece *Hearing* was a gallery installation made up of a copper chair, a zinc table, and a heated led bed. In the description of the piece, all the installed objects

⁴⁸ Smithson, Robert. *Entropy of the New Monuments*. University of California Press, Los Angeles CA, 196. Pg. 11

⁴⁹ Chave, Anna C. 'Minimalism and the. Rhetoric of Power', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 64, no. 5, January 1990 Pg.44

⁵⁰ Chave, Anna C. 'Minimalism and the. Rhetoric of Power', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 64, no. 5, January 1990 Pg.44

were connected with live electricity, with loud speakers playing an interrogation. While the compositions are a clear reference to a prison setting, the implied and forced narrative is that in a context of intimidation and the policed state.

Dan Flavin's work is described as having including corporate references in its recontextualizing the mass-produced fluorescent light. Moreover, Flavin generated a market practice that was solely supported by its authorship over the readily available material; in short, selling the name. Chave notes:

'Flavin's *Diagonal* not only looks technological and commercial - like Minimalism generally - it is an industrial product and, as such, it speaks of the extensive power exercised by the commodity in a society where virtually everything is for sale.'⁵¹

Donald Judd's work can also be argued to be making reference to an implied inner figure or "strong body." Through composition and scale, Judd's work captures the characterization of the proverbial "strong silent type" as described by Chave. In the work there is an expression of power, which similarly lacks feeling or communication.

It's argued that while minimalist sculpture did succeed in its aim of expressing an implicit power over museum space, the model and phallic heavy references to outdated notions, exposed the monuments to their own overcompensation evolving since the previous period. It's not until pieces are introduced, having other dilapidated forms via

⁵¹ Chave, Anna C. 'Minimalism and the. Rhetoric of Power', Arts Magazine, vol. 64, no. 5, January 1990 Pg.46

destruction or judgment from time and the elements, that the absolute nature of the works begin to feel less absolute and thus less authoritarian in nature.

Robert Smithson viewed the implied nullity in the museum as one of its major assets. Moreover, he viewed the evolution of the museum's purpose as becoming one of spectacle rather than taking on the aspects of art. Where museums once nullified space (devoid of self-projection), it's becoming increasingly engaged in what's happening rather than what is not. In Smithson's view, museums were made to have been needing to be associated with myth, which puts art in a position rested in a commodity value system and creates a false utility where art shouldn't mix. Allan Kaprow⁵² makes the point that while Robert valued high humor and art as a meaningless thing, the museum context itself creates it.⁵³

⁵² American painter, assemblage and performance artist (Fluxus Movement 1960-70).

⁵³ Ursprung, Philip. Allan Kaprow, Robert SMithson, and the Limits to Art. University of California Press. Los Angeles CA. 2013

Chapter III

Destruction on Display: Practice and Presentation

In recent years, we have seen a progression toward the dismantling of this resonant modernity in both iconoclastic aesthetics and social intervention in the contemporary, with the practice and concept both being free from the confines of institutional structure and influence. As an example, earlier in 2017, the city council of Charlottesville voted to remove a confederate statue of Robert E. Lee and the surrounding park. Later, on August 12th, a “Unite the Right” rally was scheduled following months of earlier protest from white nationalists. This rally resulted in the death of one and injury of nineteen others when a white nationalist, James Alex Fields, drove his car through a crowd of counter protesters.

By no means do I make this illustration lightly, but it's worth exploring the fanaticism and need for the illusion/safety found in connection to perceived heroism and the fetishism⁵⁴ connected to its preservation as a monument. Moreover, the social revelations made by such progressive iconoclastic action toward said icon and monument consisting of nothing but material and thing. Ernest Becker might understand this relationship in the former, as being the essence of transference as a

⁵⁴ To Becker, *Transference* could be seen as a fetish control in individuals needing to exert complete control over external circumstances. One will project and protect all of their individual qualities on an object. However, with the loss of the object, comes the fear that one might lose oneself.

certain taming of terror by means of creating order in a thought chaotic universe⁵⁵ in that certain monuments, or icons, represent what we aim to be loved by or to hate. In the former, this comes with the consequence of *Transference Terror*⁵⁶, in which one fears to lose the love of the object that manifests as an icon of one's heroic ideal⁵⁷. Iconoclasm, in this sense, successfully disrupts and challenges the heroic projects/objects of the oppressing institutional body while revealing its reality and greater insignificance. Following the events of Charlottesville, there was a wave of stated illegal and legal instances of iconoclasm of Confederate monuments in Durham, North Carolina, and Baltimore, Maryland. While the subject is still one between proposed 'heritage' and social progress, iconoclasm now manifests as an aesthetic tool that still marks the propositions of progress, but through actual physical instances and evidence of destruction.

During the same year as this Iconoclastic wave, contemporary artists Doreen Garner and Kenya (Robinson) came out with their two-person exhibition titled '*White Man On A Pedestal*' (*WMOAP*), opening at Pioneer Works in 2017 in Brooklyn, New York. It was here that Doreen Garner exhibited her piece, '*Poneros*', an 18 foot recreation of a bronze statue of J. Marion Sims⁵⁸ on display along the Museum Mile in Manhattan. While

⁵⁵ Becker, Ernst. *The Denial of Death*. The Free Press: a Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, NY. 1973. Pg.145-149

⁵⁶ "the terror of displeas- ing it, of not being able to live without it. The terror of his own finitude and impotence still haunts him, but now in the precise form of the transference object." Ernst, Becker. *The Denial of Death*. Pg. 146

⁵⁷ Becker, Ernst. *The Denial of Death*. The Free Press: a Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, NY. 1973. Pg.149

⁵⁸ Vedantam, Shankar (Host). *Remembering Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsey: The Mothers of Modern Gynecology*. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/466942135>. 2/16/2016

historically presented as the father of modern gynecology, the reality of his discoveries were based on the experimentation and exploitation of enslaved Black women in the mid 1800s without consent or access to anesthesia⁵⁹.

'*Poneros*' not only expresses the use of the French Revolutionaries' iconoclastic tactic of the displacement of prevailing social powers through the renaming of monuments, like in Garner's replacing of the original "J. Marion Sims" nameplate with "Poneros"⁶⁰, but also in its displacement from the original's space/context of institutional grandeur⁶¹. As many anti-art forms have manifested through calamity, Garner's '*Poneros*' stands at the intersection of past atrocity, present reality, and future in terms of the destruction *in* and *of* the art as a gesture toward dismantling the continuing institutional illusion of tradition.



Installation view of '*White Man On A Pedestal*' at Pioneer Works, 2017. '*Poneros*' (left) by Doreen Garner

⁵⁹ Steinhauer, Jillian. *Two Artists Ask Why We Put White Men on Pedestals*. <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/12/12/two-artists-ask-why-we-put-white-men-on-pedestals/>. 12/12/2017

⁶⁰ A biblical Greek term meaning "Evil" or "Wicked"

⁶¹ Having existed in an area with direct proximity to a plethora of publicly accessible art institutions. It was removed in April of 2018.

‘Both artists approach WMOAP from an individual practice that is responsive to their individual experiences as Black Women, operating in a system of white-male supremacy. At a time when removing Confederate statues—literally white men on pedestals—were cultural flashpoints of whiteness and class, Garner and (Robinson) played with the size, texture, and scale of white monumentality itself, referencing both real and imagined figureheads of historical exclusion.’⁶²

Iconoclasm has manifested in its deconstructive being as a force of progressive change, beyond the conventional/normative ideas surrounding it as simple brutality. The questions remain open in the aesthetic exploration of the destruction *in* art, vs. the destruction *of* art. Moreover, aesthetic iconoclasm as a matter of politics, art, and navigated areas of intersection in relationship to the greater social and ever shedding body.

Anselm Kiefer's work, as an example, conceptualized art as not only a means of exhuming memory, but as a means of confronting it and its emotional resonance as well⁶³. Despite the recreations of iconic and monumental forms to serve as an allegory reconciling his personal lineage, having been born in 1945 Germany as the country was attempting to reform their previous identity, Kiefer creates work that is conceptually materialized with the aim of reconciliation in a period of dismantlement between both living and prosthetic memory in postwar Germany. The first being memory linked to the

⁶² <https://pioneerworks.org/exhibitions/white-man-on-a-pedestal/>

⁶³ Munson, M. M. (2017). Iconoclasm as Catharsis: Anselm Kiefer and the Seeds of Memory. *International Journal of Arts Theory & History*, 12(2), 27–39.

lived experience of an individual, and the second being memories that are circulated in the public yet experienced with one's own body forming an experiential relationship.

The attitude toward the monument of Robert E. Lee and its removal then becomes an expression of violent fear, as it represented not only a newfound lack of place in a social progressive world, but also the reality of the insignificance of cis-white patriarchy as has otherwise been advertised. The removal recognizes another phenomenon posed by Becker, in what he calls "The Romantic Solution." Operating in a similar way as the Religious Solution, both answer the individual need to feel their individual form of greater heroism, a reason to be particularly "good" for something of great significance (i.e., in The Religious Solution, the good deed and following practice lend oneself the opportunity to enter heaven as a basic example of this drive to 'righteousness'). Becker argues that once modernity set in and religion began to be supplemented by logic and politics, self-glorification would then be found in form through a love object⁶⁴. This love object, then, becomes the ideal through which to fulfill one's life. This then generates its own specific sub-system, called "Transference beautification".

Spirituality, which once referred to another dimension of things, is now brought down to this earth and given form in another individual human being. Salvation itself is no longer referred to as an abstraction like God but can be sought "in the beatification of the other."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Becker, Ernst. The Denial of Death. The Free Press: a Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, NY. 1973. Pg.161

⁶⁵ Becker, Ernst. The Denial of Death. The Free Press: a Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, NY. 1973. Pg.161

In the instance of the monument of Robert E. Lee, objects became just that. It was not a piece of public art, nor was it a representation of the contemporary social standard. Rather, it operated solely as a facilitating subject of silent romantic transference over time. Through its existence as a physical object in space, it holds the child's attention to both an idealized and romanized if obsolete rhetoric. One is meant to remember the poetry of the South (heritage), rather than the reality of what it was. Implied through its physicality and material is the illusion of such a rhetoric being eternal/permanent. Icons such as this disrupt the relationship between reality and illusion, and sustain by reinforcing the child's "necessary mechanisms of defense, repression, and denial that allow him to live with the problem of serving two masters"⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ Becker, Ernst. *The Denial of Death*. The Free Press: a Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, NY. 1973. Pg.165

Conclusion

Made and Unmade: Time & Intentions Forward

It's in these created moments of chaos, destruction, and broken silence that we momentarily operate outside of a reality constructed by the mundane. The spectacle of the broken glass engages our most primal drives, alerting us to the space in which we're operating, but also instantaneously connects us to a space we presently share with others. By means of joining a destructive process with the power invested in a sought idealized state, a struggle over iconic form through its breaking, salvaging, and reuse begins to be exhumed. Additionally, this creates a reference to the actions and signals of changed circumstances and time⁶⁷.

Anti-art forms have historically been a close response to some of the great catastrophes of their respective times. Dadaism grew out of World War I and the rejection of capitalist structures. Likewise, auto-destructive art emerged out of World War II and additionally rejected industrialization. I would even further make the point that even at the height of the Vietnam War, Robert Smithson organized the exhibit *Earthworks*⁶⁸, borrowing from the title of the 1965 dystopian novel by Brian Aldiss and beginning the focus on Land Art in our Western canon. Each emphasized the critique/deconstruction of shapeshifting institutional systems and their byproduct, and to an extent, the various roles of time.

⁶⁷ Self. Excerpt from the exhibition statement of '*Bloom & Decay: Beyond Opulence*'. 2019

⁶⁸ Robert Smithson, 'Earthworks', Dwan Gallery, New York, N.Y., Oct. 1968

Spiral Jetty and *La Jetée* are two examples of a maker's attempt to reconcile with such destructions through time. In each, we get a sense of an acknowledgement and understanding of a descension of the past into entropy. In *Spiral Jetty*, it's in the form of the natural degrading archaeology of the piece's direct exposure to the elements. The variable and unstable manifestation of form at this location acts as both a time-marker and the exhumed nature of these decaying themes in relation to the present. Likewise, in the film *La Jetée* (1962), the subject character of the film is in constant reference to an abstract time before the dropping of the bomb.

In the present, both works express a returning to a work in progress, both with the intention of resolution, albeit a resolution resulting in a decay of time. With the *Spiral Jetty*, in its created intention, it is inevitably going to find itself eroded as our protagonist in *La Jetée* is to be "liquidated" as the task becomes complete.

Nothing distinguishes memories from ordinary moments. Only later do they become memorable by the scars they leave⁶⁹.

In the film, there is also a sense of the auto-destructive attitude toward technology and humankind's industry both to create and destroy. However, *Spiral Jetty* again better represents the idea of passive destruction versus that based around its violent nature. In the former, it's either the implied violence of individual erasure or world-ending

⁶⁹ (Narrator, *La Jetée*)

catastrophe, the latter being a relinquishing of human production to the natural progress of time and decay.

Lastly, in a documentation reel of *Spiral Jetty*, there's an interesting shot of Smithson in his film as we follow the maker via helicopter. He runs down the jetty for what seems like an endless amount of time as he progresses towards the center. However, as he follows this spiral form and begins to get closer to the eye, past and near future parts of the track begin to be revealed in the frame. The montage continues until reaching the center and conclusion of the track, leaving the artist nowhere to go. Likewise in *La Jetée*, the protagonist asks those residing in the future to return him to the beginning of his memories, but once he returned to a pier that haunts him throughout these temporal relapses, it's revealed that at the end is in fact the inevitability of death. It's in these final moments that past, present, and future clash for our subjects, leading to a progressively quickened state of entropy and reset.

Destruction In/Of the Exhibition Space :

In the 1969 exhibition, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, curator Harald Szeeman questions if art needs form in any traditional sense. Szeeman advocated for the more conceptual forms of new art emerging in the 60s, emphasising process over finalized product. In doing so, he disrupted the idea of the exhibition space as both a vehicle of delivery, space of aesthetic hierarchy based value/commodity, while

also speaking to a conversation about whether or not art could remain an immaterial entity. The show included a large roster of artists such as Richard Serra, Walter de Maria, Joseph Beuys, and Rober Morris, among others in their circles. It was here that Richard Serra would splash lead, Walter de Maria would produce his piece, *Art by Telephone*, Michael Heizer would smash museum sidewalks, and Daniel Buren^{70*} would paste stripes around the community (before his subsequent arrest). While the exhibition was highly regarded and a conceptually novel critique of the monetary functions of the space and art object, Szeemann's directorship at The Kunsthalle Bern was revoked. As its committee was formed of local and more conservative artists at the time, it was stated that Szeemann's directorship was "destructive to humankind"⁷¹.

Szeeman's disruption of the ceremony of the white cube was twofold. First, he created inaccessibility through the exhibition of gesture, bringing the space as a whole into the realm of aesthetic experience rather than as the traditional extended arm of the art market. Secondly, his practice innovated the idea of the curator as being more than just a caretaker. Instead, it produced a role in which institutional intent could be considered or ignored through the reclamation of the white cube as a raw creative material itself.

⁷⁰Daniel Buren was not invited to participate in the exhibition, so in protest pasted these stripes on billboards all over Bern, Switzerland. He was subsequently arrested, and asked to leave the country.

⁷¹ Smith, Roberta. "Harald Szeemann, 71, Curator of Groundbreaking shows: Obituary (Obit)." *New York Times*: A.21. 2005.

Trial by Ordeal & Reverie: Meeting Fire with Fire:

While the practice of post-opulence began with fire as its base element, the overall concept is not dictated nor characterized solely by it. That being said, while there is a long history of fire in classical psychoanalysis⁷² as well as long-standing cross-cultural significance overall, the reverie in regard to post-opulence is contemplative, experiential, and grounded as practice, rather than an observed or sought spectacle. In Gaston Bachelard's *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938), "fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all life to its conclusion."⁷³ There is the acknowledged draw to the element as being more than just change, as a destructive force prefacing renewal⁷⁴.

It's worth noting the contrast between post-opulence and the well-known contemporary event 'Burning Man'. This event, while widely regarded as a grand spectacle and weekend of utopia, has long since been rooted in capitalist institutionalization and thus has become a product of the systems it claims to transcend, in all actuality manifesting as an inaccessible playground for the privileged body. While the event itself is largely credited to Larry Harvy and Jerry James, it was actually inspired by the work of sculptor Mary Graubeger. Several years prior to 1986 and the credited date of the men's "founding" of *Burning Man*, Mary Graubeger frequently hosted happenings (during the

⁷² To Freud, it represented passion/desire. Jung, a similarly a (creative) drive.

⁷³ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Beacon Press. Boston, MA, 1938. Pg. 16

⁷⁴ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Beacon Press. Boston, MA, 1938. Pg. 16

times of solstice), in which washed ashore objects were made into sculpture and then burned among peers.

I was a sculptor and I'd get bored sitting around the studio, so I'd pick up stuff washed up on shore and build sculptures. We'd stay 'till the evening and cook, and then it seemed natural to torch the sculptures. It was a personal thing, for fun. . . . I liked everything to disappear quickly. It's more beautiful to have people experience it and then it's gone.⁷⁵

Moreover, despite the coincidental stopping of her burnings in the mid-80s, she would later state:

The difference between me and Larry, is that Larry needs to be famous and feel that he has moved society in some way. I don't need that at all. ... I admire Larry because he got what he wanted. Most people would have dropped out when Burning Man must've seemed like a piddling daydream. But he was sure of it, and he was right. People seem to need it, and they come from all over the world. But I know it's hard on Larry's health and I have no desire for it. Women can have children — fame is like a man's own child.⁷⁶

I was asked an interesting, yet important, question when explaining this project over white wine and applesauce⁷⁷. I was asked if I intended for post-opulence to be widely acknowledged. It was an interesting question because it's the exact premise that the formal writing of this would imply otherwise, having been produced within an institutional project that offers some form of abstract validity. The answer I've come up with, however, is that there is the intent to produce a project that could be further torn

⁷⁵ <https://www.trippingly.net/burning-man-musings/2019/2/16/mary-grauberger>

⁷⁶ <https://www.trippingly.net/burning-man-musings/2019/2/16/mary-grauberger>

⁷⁷ A fantastically cringe-worthy combination. Looking at you Leigh.

apart through its inevitable failures as things currently stand. Additionally, I hope for it to manifest suspicious understanding and questioning of the cost of an autonomy that heroism projects provide, particularly through the institutions of art.

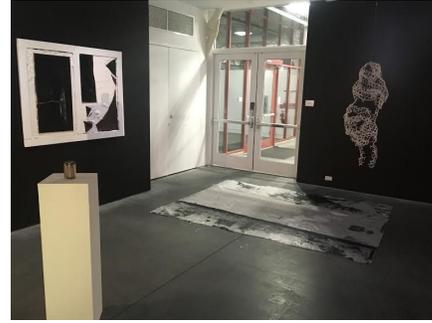
'Bloom & Decay: Beyond Opulence' (2019):

The exhibition of *Bloom & Decay: Beyond Opulence*, an exhibition curated by myself in 2018, both conceptually and in its curatorial format provided its own brand of subversion within an institutionally controlled space. The exhibition itself took place in the Swell Gallery (now Schafer Gallery) at SFAI. It comprised myself and three other artists exploring themes of destruction, violence, and decay. While post-opulence had only recently been termed and research limited at the time, I passed along what I had collected to peers operating within similar themes, and working across mediums. They included Leigh Daniels, working with plant and organic chemistry, creating compositions of natural erosion and material interaction. Gautama Ramesh, with a video art piece titled *Hours Pass like Centuries*, with the theme being time. T-Shell, with their various installations in reference to the invisibility/violence toward the body. Lastly myself, including burnt objects, and ephemera that were compositionally/physically unstable. Curatorially, the exhibition was not so much concerned about any works adhering to the gallery standard, but rather to distill what post-opulence could begin to manifest as both an exhibition and as a less individually based concept. Additionally, to tease the normalized standard of how an exhibition of

this nature could operate within an academic institution. That being said, it didn't come without its particular (though later unapproved) requests.

The first request for this exhibit, which was eventually denied by administration, was to produce five 6' x 3" gashes in the west gallery wall. The wall itself was constructed over a hideaway section between the original concrete and new white plaster wall. Knowing this space existed inspired the idea about what this space in between could mean in relationship to the new and artificial space. I imagined what it would be like to stare at this literal void in space, where all that was behind the darkness of the corridor, the real foundations and remains of the original building, which ironically was a military site for over one hundred years before later becoming the art studios it is now.

The second request was to cover each exhibiting wall with black paint. I wanted to take something brand new and again perform some action of disruption against the pristine and new/opulent space. Lastly and though the connection admittedly came after, it was interesting to experience this inversion of black box and white cube. While the implicit nature of the black box is that of time, in contrast to the neutralizing characteristics of the white cube, the darkening of the walls took the space out of the miraculous and supported the works in a unified movement toward the opposite.



(Above) Installation views of Bloom & Decay: Beyond Opulence (2016)

Like the concept of post-opulence itself, I envisioned this exhibition as a synthesis of many parts to create the whole, somewhat in the vein of how the use of gesture of in individual works transformed institutional preconceived ideas as the exhibition and space itself, being separate and autonomous on its own like in Szeemann's exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*. Likewise from the *Destruction in Art Symposium*, each work emphasized autonomous research and interpretation of the concept of post-opulence and past anti-art theory, bringing to both the concept and exhibition a broader spectrum surrounding destructive aesthetics with the intention of mapping out a more diverse and evolving matrix of destructive quality in aesthetic response through iconoclastic gesture.



'Fuck Your White Wall', in closing of Bloom & Decay: Beyond Opulence (2016)

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