

DESTRUCTION THROUGH BOREDOM



VIOLENT  
PLEBISCITE

DESTRUCTION THROUGH GLEE



EVERYTHING  
MUST  
GO

DESTRUCTION THROUGH CONVICTION



DEATH IS FREE

DESTRUCTION THROUGH GLEE



AUTO-  
DESTRUCTION

ART-SHIT IDIOCY



DESTRUCTION THROUGH CONVICTION



I HATE  
WHAT THEY STAND FOR

DESTRUCTION THROUGH LOVE



THE MADNESS OF  
KISSES

THE ANGELS HAVE  
THE PHONE BOX



# DESTRUCTION

V&A Friday Late, 27 September 2013  
Jes Fernie, independent curator, and Salome Schmuki, graphic designer

# DESTRUCTION THROUGH FEAR

Robert Smithson, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970, Kent State University, Ohio  
Lenin's bust by Lubetkin, 1942 Finsbury, London  
Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993, Bethnal Green, London

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Alfredo Jaar, *The Skoghall Konsthall*, 2007, Sweden  
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# DESTRUCTION THROUGH LOVE

Jacob Epstein, Oscar Wilde's tomb, 1914, Pere Lachaise Cemetery, Paris  
Mark Wallinger, *Time and Relative Dimensions in Space*, 2001, Oxford

# DESTRUCTION THROUGH BOREDOM

Vong Phaophanit, *Ash and Silk Wall*, 1993, Thames Barrier, London  
Victor Passmore, *Apollo Pavilion*, 1969, Peterlee, Durham

# DESTRUCTION THROUGH GLEE

Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001, Former C&A store, Oxford Street, London  
Jean Tinguely, *Homage to New York*, 1960, Museum of Modern Art, New York



Robert Smithson, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970, Kent State University, Ohio

## DESTRUCTION THROUGH FEAR

Smithson made *Partially Buried Woodshed* in January 1970 when he was invited to make a work at Kent State University during a one week residency. He had originally wanted to do a 'mud pour' work but it was too cold, so he worked hastily with his students to develop an alternative piece which addressed his interest in entropy and the accumulation of history.

Twenty truckloads of soil were dumped on the centre beam of an empty shed until the structure cracked. Before he left the campus, the piece was officially transferred to the University and valued at \$10,000 and Smithson said that he expected it to "go back to the land".

A few months after the piece was completed, a student protest against America's involvement in the Vietnam War took place. Soldiers from the National Guard shot at unarmed students, killing four and wounding nine.

The event was commemorated on *Partially Buried Woodshed* with the words 'May 4 Kent 70', forever linking the work of art and the 'breaking point' of the beam to the cultural shift that many consider the Kent State shootings to represent.

**MAY 4TH KENT 70 – daubed in paint on a horizontal beam on the woodshed, to commemorate the killing of student war protestors by home guards.**



Site where *House* by Rachel Whiteread was located, Bethnal Green, London 1993



Lenin's bust by Lubetkin, 1942, Finsbury, London

## DESTRUCTION THROUGH FEAR

*House* was a concrete cast of the inside of a Victorian terraced house by artist Rachel Whiteread. Commissioned by Artangel, the public sculpture was installed in autumn 1993 and demolished by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in January 1994. It was always intended to be a temporary work, but was prematurely destroyed by a council whose members considered it to be more relevant to the 'Hampstead arty crowd' rather than the people of East London.

The work was positioned in the same location as the original house (193 Grove Road) in Bethnal Green and became one of the most contentious works of public art in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain. A set of binary oppositions were rolled out in the media: local verses national, the art world verses the real world, grass roots realities against otherworldly dilettantes.

On November 23 a group of jurors at the Tate Gallery decided that Whiteread would be the winner of the 1993 Turner Prize, and Bow Neighbourhood Councillors voted that *House* should be demolished with immediate effect.

Twenty years later, *House* is a testament to the power that a destructive act can wield. It has become more poignant through the act of destruction and is now part of a memory trace for a huge number of people, the majority of whom never saw the work.

**EXCRESCENCE** – word used by Councillor Flounders to describe *House* (frieze article, issue 14 Jan 1994)

In the early 1940s the Foreign Office took over a campaign from a local communist party in Finsbury, north London to erect a memorial to Lenin who had lived in the area in 1902. Positioned as a public gesture of goodwill to the Soviet Union, the memorial, designed by Russian émigré Berthold Lubetkin, was unveiled in 1942. 17 tons of concrete and granite were used; Lenin's face was bathed in red light through tinted glass.

In 1943 the tide of war turned against the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich and the Lenin memorial was broken up, tarred and placarded with Fascist slogans. 'Communism is Jewish' was daubed in paint across the front and a Swastika was drawn on Lenin's forehead. Three policemen were hired to guard the memorial around the clock. The bust became an embarrassment to the British Government; Finsbury Council declared it a traffic hazard. Lubetkin himself destroyed the monument in 1945 with the use of a crane, burying it in the foundation of Lenin Court.

There is a story that Lubetkin made 22 replica casts of Lenin's bust and stashed them in an underground shelter, to ensure a constant supply of busts in the event that they were destroyed.

Lenin Court was renamed 'Bevin Court'. A couple of letters shuffled around and an alternative, sanitised version of history is created in which a leader of the Soviet Union is morphed into a right wing Labour Foreign Secretary.

[Research by Joe Kerr, Head of Programme, Critical & Historical Studies, Royal College of Art]

**Lenin's bust: COMMUNISM IS JEWISH** – daubed in paint over the monument



# ART-SHIT IDIOCY



Alfredo Jaar, *The Skoghall Konsthall*, 2007, Sweden

## DESTRUCTION THROUGH CONVICTION

In 2000 Alfredo Jaar was commissioned by the town of Skoghall in south Sweden to propose a work of public art. Skoghall is a small town built to provide a workforce for a large pulp mill owned by a multinational corporation.

Jaar was appalled by the lack of cultural provision in the town and proposed to design and build a new gallery – the Skoghall Konsthall – using funds from the multinational corporation that ran the paper mill, rather than the public money he had been offered. The corporation agreed and construction began.

The Konsthall was entirely made from paper and timber from the paper mill. The inaugural exhibition was curated by Jaar and included work by 15 young Swedish artists. Part of Jaar's proposal was that the building should be officially opened by the mayor in the presence of the local community and, 24 hours later, be burnt down.

Local outrage ensued with people arguing that such a cultural space was too important to the town to be burned down. Jaar had succeeded in his ambition to create momentum, giving local people an opportunity to raise their voices and state their desires.

**ART-SHIT IDIOCY**, description by school porter of a work of art in the 8<sup>th</sup> Swiss Sculpture Exhibition, Bienne, Switzerland, 1980.



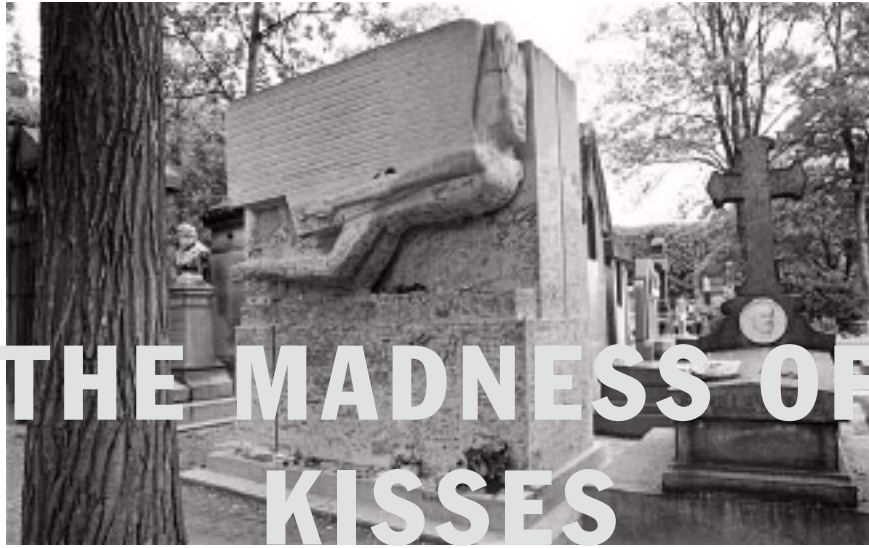
Gordon Matta-Clark, *Window Blow-Out*, 1976, the Bronx, New York

In December 1976 Gordon Matta-Clark was invited to participate in the exhibition *Idea as Model* hosted by the highly respected Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York. Mainly consisting of proposals by aspiring architects offering idealised visions of future cityscapes, Matta-Clark's aim was to introduce an element of realism through documentation of derelict buildings in the Bronx, an area that had been failed by architectural idealism.

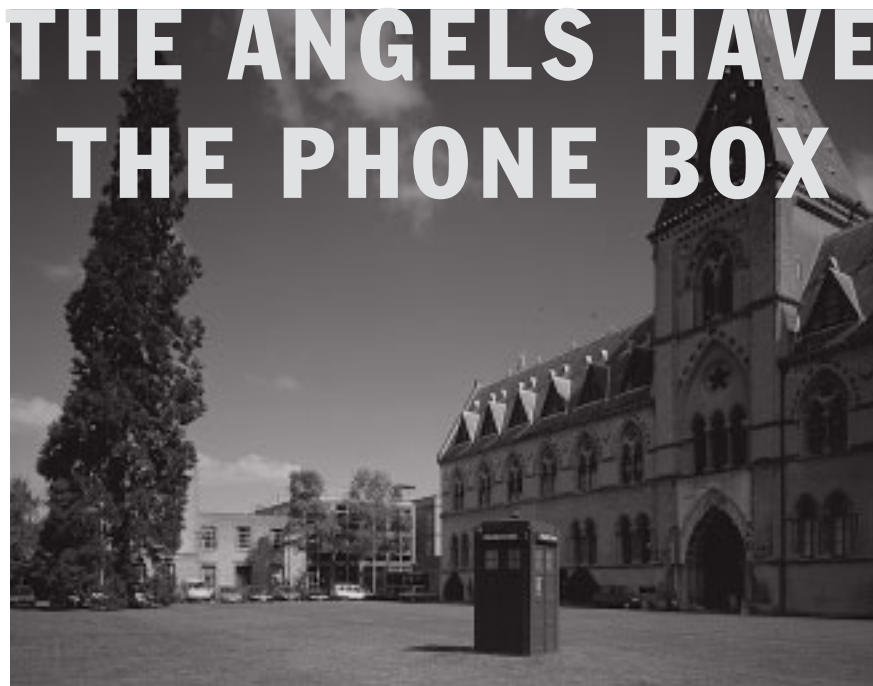
He proposed a small-scale cutting in one of the seminar rooms but turned up on the afternoon of the opening with an air gun, asking for permission to shoot out a couple of the windows of the Institute instead. He argued that the windows were already cracked and would be good frames for photographs he'd taken of housing projects in the Bronx.

Permission was granted and Matta-Clark proceeded to shoot out all the windows on the floor of the Institute while raging against the university authorities and architectural ideologies they supported. The windows were swiftly boarded up before the opening, but the work went down in the university's history as a sublime act of intellectual heroism or stupidity, depending on your viewpoint.

**I HATE WHAT THEY STAND FOR** – statement made by Matta-Clark after shooting out the windows of the Institute. 'They' refers to the architectural profession and Matta-Clark's teachers at Cornell where he studied architecture.



Jacob Epstein, Oscar Wilde's tomb, 1914, Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris



Mark Wallinger, *Time and Relative Dimensions in Space*, 2001, Oxford

## DESTRUCTION THROUGH LOVE

Jacob Epstein was selected by Wilde's literary executor to design a tomb for Oscar Wilde in 1908. Whilst transporting the monument to the Pere Lachaise Cemetery from London, Epstein was ordered to pay £120 import duty to French customs (a sum which amounted to the value of the stone).

Once in Paris, the monument was covered with tarpaulin by order of Parisian officials who deemed the naked human form to be too risqué for public view. On returning to the cemetery one evening Epstein found that the testicles had been covered by plaster by officials who felt that they were unusually large.

The monument was placed under police guard while Epstein attempted to continue to work on it. Frustrated with the lack of progress, Epstein managed to bribe one of the policemen on duty to look away. Eventually, much to the chagrin of Epstein, a bronze plaque similar in shape to that of a butterfly was placed over the offending testicles. A few weeks after the launch, Aleister Crowley, the poet who had unveiled the monument met Epstein in a café wearing a bronze butterfly around his neck. He informed Epstein that his work was now on public display as he had originally intended it.

In 1961 the testicles were removed by a vandal. Some say the cemetery manager used them as a paperweight. They are now missing. In 2011 a glass barrier was installed around the monument to stem the effects of lipstick erosion created by visitors planting kisses on the tomb.

**THE MADNESS OF KISSES** – a quote from a letter from Wilde to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, which played a part in his conviction of two years hard labour in Pentonville and then Wandsworth Prison.

*Time and Relative Dimensions in Space* was the outcome of a residency that Mark Wallinger carried out at Ruskin School of Drawing & Fine Art and Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

Wallinger's aim was two fold: to make a work that would engage children who visited the museum and to create a poetic link to the institution. Out of this came a proposal which looked at the museum as a repository of time and memory. The Tardis (from which the acronym of the title is derived) in the TV series *Dr Who* plays a powerful role in many children's imagination: it is immediately identifiable, both humdrum and extraordinary and offers a route through to impossible pasts and futures.

When the work was installed in the grounds of the museum it was dismantled over night by *Dr Who* fans wanting to acquire memorabilia for their collection. The following day the work was re-made by the commissioners with half a ton of ballast placed in the bottom, and all protruding collectable items attached with superglue. It remained untouched for the remainder of the show.

**THE ANGELS HAVE THE PHONE BOX** – quote from Sally Sparrow in the 10<sup>th</sup> episode of the 3<sup>rd</sup> series of *Dr Who* (2007).





Vong Phaophanit, *Ash and Silk Wall*, 1993, Thames Barrier



Victor Passmore, *Apollo Pavilion*, 1969, Peterlee, Durham

## DESTRUCTION THROUGH BOREDOM

Vong Phaophanit was commissioned to make a permanent artwork for the new Thames barrier gardens by commissioning agency Public Art Development Trust and London Borough of Greenwich in 1992.

In 1993 *Ash and Silk Wall* was officially opened by Lord Palumbo, Chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain. A month later, one of the panels was damaged by vandals using a concrete post. The work remained structurally sound.

The commissioners installed sensory detectors and security cameras linked to the Thames barrier security station but the work was continually vandalised over 1993–5, this time with the use of an air rifle.

In 1996 the commissioners took the decision that the extent of the damage – both structural and aesthetic – meant that the work had to be dismantled.

**VIOLENT PLEBISCITE**, from an essay by Patrick Wright, *Public Art and the British Vandal*, 1995

Victor Passmore was Consulting Director of Urban Design for the Peterlee Development Corporation from 1955 until the 1970s. In 1969 he marked the culmination of this work with *Apollo Pavilion*, a reference to the first manned mission to the moon that took place in 1969.

A work of abstract sculpture which brought together the two disciplines of art and architecture, it was hugely controversial and garnered much local criticism. It spanned a small man-made lake and is made of reinforced concrete cast on site. In its original form, the Pavilion provided a pedestrian link between the two halves of the Sunny Blunts Estate.

In the 1970s, the Peterlee Development Corporation reported that it as being used as a 'meeting place for the idle and the ill-disposed'. Minutes from a public meeting held in 1982 mention the need for a 'functional' use to be found for the sculpture, as 'residents living nearby... claim it is used as a brothel and urinal'. Passmore agreed to meet his detractors on site. He told a crowd of people gathered at the pavilion that he thought the graffiti had humanised and improved it more than he could ever have done and suggested that the solution to the problem would be to blow up neighbouring houses.

The pavilion proved too expensive to be demolished and has now been restored, to within an inch of its life. The bridge element has been discarded, rendering its original purpose null and void, creating a strangely blank, tourist-friendly icon of 1960s public art.

**DEATH IS FREE** – graffiti on the *Apollo Pavilion*.



Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001, Former C&A store, Oxford Street, London

## DESTRUCTION THROUGH GLEE

In 2000 Michael Landy won an international competition run by Artangel and The Times to produce an ambitious proposal to be realised in the UK. His work *Break Down* was presented at a disused C&A department store on Oxford Street in central London.

Over a fourteen-day period, all of Landy's personal belongings were systematically destroyed by a team of ten blue-collared operatives. Each of the 7,226 items were categorised according to type (Artworks, Clothing, Equipment, Furniture, Kitchen, Leisure, Motor Vehicle, Perishables, Reading Material and Studio Material) and placed on a roller conveyer to be pulped, granulated or smashed, ready for landfill.

Items ranged from the mundane to the priceless: Green moulded plastic frog on metal key ring... leaflet and layout plan for Alton Towers theme park... Damien Hirst paperweight... David Bowie records... cherry red Saab... till receipt... his father's sheepskin coat. Some items required specialist knowledge: a Buddhist Saab expert dismantled Landy's car. As James Lingwood, Co-director of Artangel said, it wasn't a matter of 'savage destruction but a contemplative, methodical process'.

Landy's stance against our consumerist society provoked a media storm ranging from Newsweek profiles to Viz cartoon strips. Priests and psychiatrists offered him counseling; members of the public asked him to swap his items for their own; his mother was so distressed she had to be escorted from the building and gallerists were outraged that he had destroyed other artists work, resulting in his omission in the 2002 Turner Prize shortlist.

**EVERYTHING MUST GO** – a statement painted on a wall in an earlier Landy work and the name of a monograph spanning the artists career, published by Ridinghouse in 2008.



Jean Tinguely, *Homage to New York*, Museum of Modern Art, 1960, New York

Jean Tinguely was invited by the Museum of Modern Art in New York to produce a work to be performed in the Sculpture Garden in March 1960. In collaboration with other artists and engineers, among them Billy Klüver and Robert Rauschenberg, he produced a self-destroying mechanism that performed for twenty-seven minutes during a one-night-only public performance for two hundred and fifty invited guests. Composed of bicycle wheels, dismantled musical instruments, electric motors, an addressograph, a go-cart, glass bottles, a bathtub, and other cast-offs collected from New Jersey dumps, the sculpture was twenty-three feet long, twenty-seven feet high and painted white.

During its brief operation, a meteorological trial balloon inflated and burst, coloured smoke was discharged, paintings were made and destroyed, and bottles crashed to the ground. A cacophonous round of sounds including metal drums, a radio broadcast, a recording of the artist explaining his work, and a competing shrill voice correcting him, provided a sound track to the machine's self destruction.

When the sparks escalated into flames, and a portion of the machine broke away, crashing into an NBC camera crew, a New York firefighter intervened and doused the machine with water, bringing the performance to an abrupt end. Tinguely referred to this work, and many of his other sculptural machines, as "self-constructing and self-destroying work of art". His was a precursor to the work of many contemporary artists including Michael Landy, who take a critical – and often satirical – view of mass production in our advanced industrial society.

**AUTO-DESTRUCTION** – a term invented by artist Gustav Metzger in the early 1960s to refer to art that is self-destructive, '... a total unity of idea, site, form, colour, method, and timing of the disintegrative process' (Metzger).



Jes Fernie is an independent curator and writer. She works with galleries, architectural practices and public realm organisations on public programmes, commissioning schemes and residency projects. Working primarily beyond gallery walls, she is interested in an expansive idea of contemporary artistic practice, which encompasses dialogue, research, engagement and serendipity. This publication is available to download from her website.

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[www.salomeschmuki.ch](http://www.salomeschmuki.ch)



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JEWISH**



**MAY 4TH KENT 70**

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