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The twilight world of 'zombie art'

John Sunyer

Does a piece of art cease to be valuable once it's damaged?



©Brian Shumway

There's a scene in Ben Lerner's acclaimed new novel *10:04* in which the narrator describes visiting the Brooklyn-based "Institute for Totaled Art". Inside, he's told to close his eyes and put his hands out, and "what felt like a series of porcelain balls or figurines" is placed into them. He opens his eyes to discover that he is holding the small metallic fragments of a shattered Jeff Koons balloon dog sculpture, once "worth enough money to charge the experience of holding its ruins with a frisson of transgression".

Like other works collected by this institute — a painting by Jim Dine, a photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson, and so on — the balloon dog sculpture has been removed from the marketplace and legally declared worthless, a "total loss" in insurance parlance. Even so, the damage to a work can be so minor it's barely visible to the naked eye. When the narrator examines the Cartier-Bresson photo he sees no damage, "no tears, scratches, fading, stains". What's more, the no-longer artworks seem to take on a more interesting quality than they possessed before becoming damaged. They pose questions such as when is art beyond repair? Who decides? Does a crack in a sculpture pose a threat to the way we see it?

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If you thought such speculation was purely the stuff of postmodernist fiction, you'd be wrong. The institute in *10:04* isn't make-believe but based on the real-life Salvage Art Institute (SAI), founded five years ago by Elka Krajewska. A Polish-born New York-based artist, Krajewska discovered that many damaged artworks, deemed beyond repair and legally declared worthless, were not destroyed but, instead, lived on in warehouses, forgotten by anyone other than the insurance companies that had become the works' owners.

Krajewska then persuaded AXA Art, one of the world's largest contemporary art insurers, to donate her a sampling of its inventory. She received around 50 works in varying condition; among them a Koons sculpture similar to the one described in *10:04*. The SAI went on to stage an exhibition, *No Longer Art*, at Columbia University, New York City, at which visitors were encouraged to handle the pieces of the now totally worthless Koons (words rarely typed), including the balloon dog's head, enclosed in a brown envelope with "Broken" written across it. They were also allowed, if they so wished, to put their arms

through violent slashes in canvases.

"It's not my intention to fetishise damaged art," Krajewska says, but she believes pieces salvaged in this way (sometimes referred to as "dead" or "zombie" art) can provide a new way of looking at contemporary art. "The idea that an artwork's status can be radically reassigned is what I find most interesting; how, even when damage is minor and easily restorable, something can be deemed to be art one

moment but not the next. The line where contemporary art starts and stops . . . It's crazy."

The SAI's attempts to shake up contemporary art are not to everyone's taste. Koons, an art provocateur rivalled only by British artist Damien Hirst in terms of commercial success and fame, was "unable to engage with any of our ideas", says Krajewska. When she tried to explain some of its long list of policies — for example, to liberate art "from the obligation of perpetual valuation and exchangeability" — to him at a show in Sweden last year, he "looked at me blankly. Clearly, the gallery system in its current state suits him perfectly well as it is."

10:04 author Ben Lerner, however, believes he understands what Krajewska means. "The SAI and these weird objects that had been banished from the market — a banishment that is the dream of some artists and the nightmare of others — grabbed my attention," he says, explaining that he "was struck by the intense physical experience of suddenly being able to interact with — to touch — these objects that were no longer at a set distance from the viewer because they existed in this strange limbo between regimes of value."

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©Brian Shumway
Jeff Koons' 'Balloon Dog (Red)' (1995) before it was broken

Debates about what is and is not art are nothing new, of course. Marcel Duchamp asked the question nearly 100 years ago when he decided that any ordinary "ready-made" object such as a urinal could be a work of art. More recently, in his 2013 Reith Lectures for the BBC, the British artist and Turner Prize winner Grayson Perry outlined how the ways we measure the quality of artworks have changed through the ages. The Greeks "had their golden ratio", a geometric proportion thought to be the key to creating aesthetically beautiful art; William Hogarth, one of the leading painters of the 18th century, isolated the "serpentine line of beauty", a fluid, S-shaped curve, as the essence of beauty in art.

Perry went on to devise a "mathematical formula" for what constitutes the ideal artwork in the 21st century: "You get a half-decent, non-offensive kind of idea, then you times it by the number of studio assistants, and then you divide it with an ambitious art dealer, and that equals the number of oligarchs and hedge fund managers in the world."

The artist had his tongue in his cheek but his message was clear: art today is often admired and valued more for its price tag than for its aesthetic value. Georgina Adam, editor-at-large for the Art Newspaper and the FT's Art Market columnist, agrees: "Increasingly, art is treated as an asset class. Takashi Murakami, Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin — in many instances, they aren't making art any more. They are making luxury goods. And when you buy a luxury good, you want it to be perfect, you don't tolerate any kind of damage."

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On a recent weekday morning, I visited AXA Art at an unremarkable office block in central London. A full-bodied burgundy canvas, produced in 1997 by Ed Ruscha, was hanging on the wall in front of me, the words "Do as told or suffer" bleached over and censored with white bars. Like other works by the American pop artist, it's a painting that startles and unnerves. But no longer can it be legally described as an artwork. During a recent private view at a London gallery, a celebrity visitor accidentally spilled a glass of wine over it while inspecting the painting up close. Only a few drops made contact but that was enough for AXA to declare it a total loss.

In many instances, artists are making luxury goods. And buying a luxury good, you want it to be perfect

- Georgina Adam

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The grey, unlovely office turns out to be a treasure trove of art that will not die, though it lives on largely unseen and unappreciated. On one wall hangs an Andy Warhol-inspired dress emblazoned with Campbell's soup cans (it now has a small rip in it). Across the room stands a blackened sculpture by Scottish artist David Mach of cartoon character Betty Boop. Made of matchsticks, it went up in flames. In a small corner office, other curiosities are laid out, including an antique Chinese snuff bottle that AXA paid out £180,000 for due to a crack (but one so small I couldn't see it).

Declaring an artwork a total loss demands the agreement and involvement of multiple experts. Insurance companies such as AXA mediate between art owners, appraisers and conservators before passing a final judgment on whether an artwork should be restored. Sometimes there may be no other option but to declare it a total loss. In 2006, for example, butterfly wings on a Hirst painting were damaged in transit but they couldn't be replaced because they came from a rare species of butterfly. On the other hand, sometimes the damage to a work might not necessarily be irreparable but the cost of conservation and the subsequent loss in market value are thought to be greater than the amount for which it is insured.

Clare Dewey has dealt with hundreds of cases as a claims manager at AXA (she has since left the company). She says that even if works have been legally declared worthless, this doesn't mean they are without value, or might not one day have a market value restored to them. "If the artist is still alive then they may have the [visual] rights to a piece but, otherwise, we decide what to do with it. In some

instances, we go on to sell total loss works at auction and make more money back on them than on the claim we paid out.”

Profitable work, I say. Does this make AXA Art into a kind of art dealership as well? Dewey pauses. “In a mini way, yes, I suppose it does,” she replies. “I hadn’t thought of it like that. But yes, we have our little zone.”

This “zone” in which art insurance companies operate is little-known and the work they do is largely subjective. No wonder, then, that ascribing “total loss” status to an artwork is often messy work. Dewey concedes that settling total loss claims “is far from being an exact science”. Victor Wiener, a veteran independent art appraiser in New York who is often called in to such cases, is more forthright: “It’s complicated, with many conflicts of interest.”

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Sooner or later, things fall apart. Julia Nagle’s east London studio is filled with possible future additions to the Salvage Art Institute. An art conservator for more than two decades, she’s one of the best in the UK at spotting the collision of aesthetics and time — sometimes gradual, sometimes sudden — when it becomes clear to the eye that a thing of beauty will not last for ever.

Like a modern hospital, her work space is light and clean. Her fridge has milk and some rather more unusual contents — a syringe filled with glue, a pot of gelatin — while conservation tools are stored in glass-fronted cabinets containing a selection of more than a hundred chemicals. Today she’s working on a magnificent yet ripped 1967 painting by Li Yuan-chia, a pioneer of abstract and conceptual art in Taiwan who used only four colours: black, red, gold and white. Elsewhere, there are large tables upon which “patients” are placed while being treated. On one a policeman is lying in rough shape: he’s missing both legs from the knees down, and a wing like that of an angel’s. The “Flying Copper”, a cardboard figure by British street artist Banksy that’s owned by a private collector, will need new legs.

They will be painstakingly made by Nagle and attached to the original body with small wooden dowels. Sections will need to be resprayed with the original paint. “Look closely and you can see all the different colours in there,” she says. “It’s mainly black but there are also several different shades of grey. When you try and do the restoration you think, ‘Hmmm, Banksy’s very technically able, this is going to be tricky.’

“A lot of conservation work is preventive but this is quite a big intervention,” she adds. “Usually, the greater the intervention, the greater the loss in value.”

“Invasiveness” is one of the terms she uses to describe the level of conservation. The term “inherent vice” — referring to when a structural flaw surfaces due to the failure of a specific material used by an artist — is another favourite among conservators.

“With contemporary art, the artist will have an opinion on it,” says Nagle. “They will advise on how to conserve their work. If Banksy is happy with what we do, he’ll sign off on the fact that the work has been conserved in a manner consistent with his vision. But if he’s not happy with our work, it might have to be signed off as a total loss.”

Nagle is one of a handful of private conservators in the UK specialising in modern and contemporary art. In the coming years, she expects an even greater demand for her services. “Art has become a lot harder to protect as an increased number of significant works reside not in museums but within collectors’ homes, where they are more likely to be damaged,” she says.

Even when damage is minor, something can be deemed to be art one moment but not the next

- Elka Krajewska

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Another artwork in her care is a five-panelled double-sided folding screen by Ed Ruscha with a message across it, made from lacquered wood in relief. AXA Art, which legally owns the work after declaring it a total loss five years ago, asked me not to say anything more specific about its identity because the company hopes to resell it once its restoration is complete.

“Of course, AXA is a business,” says Clare Dewey, “we’re hoping to make money on this, but not many insurers would go to this length to get something restored. For us to say we can’t do anything for it would be too upsetting. I really hope we can give it a second life.”

Nagle agrees. “It’s a shame when works such as this become total losses. It’s such a waste.”

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In today’s buoyant market, there is always hope. Take the case of “Le Rêve” and Steve Wynn’s clumsy elbow. In 2006, the casino magnate agreed to sell Picasso’s 1932 portrait of his mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter, for \$139m to hedge fund billionaire Steven Cohen. Shortly before the sale, though, while enthusiastically showing the painting to guests, Wynn accidentally put his arm through the canvas.

A restorer spent two months repairing the work, at a cost of more than \$90,000, but by then Cohen had backed out of the deal. Eventually, the insurer Lloyd’s of London declared the work a “partial loss” — meaning it was free to go back on to the market.

When Cohen went back to buy it in 2013, Wynn sold it to him for \$155m — \$16m more than the earlier asking price.

John Sunyer is commissioning editor on FT Life & Arts

Photographs: Brian Shumway

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