

The Art of Vandalism – Vandalism of Art

Interview with art vandal Thomas Grandi

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As long as there has been art, there has been the destruction of it. Not just the occasional, accidental destruction, but the deliberate vandalism of it. Some artists destroy their own works, others bin art (Michael Landy – Art Bin, South London Gallery 2010), but there is a long history of those who deliberately seek to destroy the work of others.

Since Edvard Eriksen's bronze statue 'Little Mermaid' was decapitated in the Copenhagen Harbour by Jorgen Nash and the Situationist Internationale in 1964, it has been repeatedly and regularly attacked to this day.

'The Fall of the Damned' painting by Rubens had to withstand an acid attack in 1959, Rembrandt's Danae painting was attacked with sulfuric acid and knife slashes in 1985, Michelangelo's marble statue of David was attacked with a hammer in 1991, and Damien Hirst's work of a lamb in formaldehyde, 'Away from the Flock' turned a new colour when Mark Bridger poured black ink into the tank in May 1994 at the Serpentine Gallery. There have also been prominent vandals such as the Israeli ambassador to Sweden, Zvi Mazel, who in 2004 took a dislike to 'Snow White and the Madness of truth', an installation work by Swedish artists Dror Feiler and Gunilla Skoeld-Feiler. Consisting of a pool of water coloured blood red surrounded by lights, Mazel tipped one of the lights into the pool causing a short circuit.

Great artworks such as Picasso's Guernica, which in 1974 was spray-painted over with the slogan 'Kill Lies All' by Tony Shafrazi, have fallen victim as well as the currently lesser known.

One example of this would be the incident involving an exhibition by Mexican contemporary artist Gabriel Kuri at the Museion (Museum for modern and contemporary art) in Bolzano, Italy.

During the Vernisage of his solo show 'Soft Information in your Hard Facts' on June 4th, 2010, one of his sculptures, 'Three Arrested Clouds', was vandalized by being bereft of its centre piece, said three clouds, which consisted of 3 pairs of folded grey and white socks wedged between two large, solid rocks. The thief was able to get away, but dared to write a ransom note and eventually returned the clouds a week later, when he was held and indicted.

Now this thief is planning a large exhibition showing the works of other 'art vandals'. His name is Thomas Grandi from Bolzano, Italy, a painter and performance artist, born in 1979, who studied Art & Design at Bolzano University. His latest exhibition was held at Gea Politi's Milan Gallery Conduits early 2010, together with Eva Kotatkova.

PS: How did you end up taking the socks, was it a planned event, or did you react spontaneously?

TG: It all starts with me that I go to the opening of the exhibition by Gabriel Kuri at the Museion. Although the message I wanted to convey with my gesture was clearly present in my head, I did not plan any rash actions. Then I saw "Three Arrested Clouds", a collection of rocks and socks rolled

up, and that was much in line with what I thought, it was almost perfect, and I so I did it. I took those socks and fled.

Days later I decided to give the whole action an ironically serious touch just to exteriorize the value that one gives to natural materials simply exposed. I sent a ransom note with pictures of the hostages, asking no payment but the recognition as performance art of my act. I asked for the tapes of the museum at the time of the theft, but they have never been granted to me.

If someone considers my act a real theft then that is surreal.

Yet, upon returning my booty, the legal problems began, which certainly I expected, but which continue to be part of an awareness and positioning in relation to the whole discussion that I wanted to unleash.

The fact that these socks were part of a work by Kuri, or were simply exposed in the Museion was and is irrelevant.

PS: Did the artist Gabriel Kuri or the Museion have a particular relevance to you before the act?

TG: This is not an action aimed at a specific recipient, because it was never meant to be harmful, there is no specific reference to the work or the artist but rather to contemporary art and its materials. It was not an attempt to do damage to the Museion, but rather an interaction with a museum or an exhibition-space in general.

What is certain is that the Museion represents the area symbolically well, but my action would not lose its value in any other, or with any other work.

PS: Were you aware that you might be arrested and jailed when you replaced/ returned the socks?

TG: In fact, I do not see my doing as a theft, even if it has some of the characteristics, simply because I have not benefited materially from my deed. I did not steal anything to keep it or for reasons of profit. I just wanted to focus on the value of the work to the value of its parts, and how much the context of the exhibition counts.

The socks are art when exhibited in a museum, are socks if I take them home.

And so it is from a legal standpoint, a theft, but from an artistic point of view, it is not, it is only a dialogue expressed in different ways.

PS: What is the current legal situation with regards to this incident?

TG: Choosing to return the socks was a necessity for me, because if I hadn't then I would have reduced everything to an action as good as another, with the only aggravating factor that it was taken against an institution namely a museum, which was not my intention.

I knew that by doing so I would go to meet legal consequences that actually still continue, the case could not be closed even with the withdrawal of the complaint by the Museion, but if I had not done it, the discussion that I'm making today, and the meaning of my gesture would have been completely lost.

PS: What are your future artistic plans?

TG: I think at this point it would be interesting to re-elaborate my statement by comparing it with that of other artists who have taken the same steps of interacting with the exhibits.

I'd like to think of an exhibition that brings together some elements of destruction of art, to highlight that creative processes are not always aimed at creation in the strict sense.

As for me, however, I continue to work on some projects, carrying on in a style which is more mine, not every day I'm out to steal things in museums.

The End.