

PAUL INGRAM is working towards a PhD at Birkbeck College, University of London. His research focuses on the concept of philistinism in relation to twentieth and twenty-first century avant-garde anti-art. He has a BA in English and an MA in Creative and Critical Writing from the University of Sussex.

[pingra01@mail.bbk.ac.uk](mailto:pingra01@mail.bbk.ac.uk)

## Exhibition Review

# ‘Art Under Attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm’

Tate Britain, October 2013 to January 2014

Paul Ingram



---

PREDICTABLY, THE *DAILY TELEGRAPH*'S REVIEW OF THIS EXHIBITION REACTS VIOLENTLY AGAINST IT, with an aggression seemingly motivated by the critic's distaste for vandalism itself: 'When some bright spark at Tate Britain came up with the idea of doing a show about the history of Iconoclasm in this country why wasn't the plan strangled at birth?' He is similarly shrill and hysterical about an essay in the catalogue on the political value of iconoclastic actions by the suffragettes: 'This pernicious drivel amounts to an open invitation to any person or any group with a grievance to target works of art hanging in national museums.' And he condemns all perpetrators of attacks on modern and contemporary art in the hypocritically sententious tone of a lay preacher: 'However they try to justify what they've done, their actions are always selfish, always self-serving and never forgivable.' The exhibition is awarded a derisory single star.<sup>1</sup>

This review will also be negative, but for different reasons. The *Daily Telegraph*'s censure, encouraging though it is, does not turn out to be a reliable indicator of the actual quality of 'Art Under Attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm'. The material on display is generally disappointing, being dominated by documentary evidence of damaged artworks and restored or replica versions of the originals. The difficulty involved in presenting objects

which have either been completely destroyed, or where all traces of violence have been carefully erased, is of course understandable. The inherently challenging nature of the topic is nevertheless compounded by curatorial blunders, such as the bloody-minded decision to further diminish the choice of artefacts by restricting the scope of the exhibition to Britain. The organization of the collection is also intellectually incoherent, despite the apparent simplicity of its structure, working chronologically through religious, political and artistic iconoclasm, as if these categories were discrete and sequential. There are several individual items which are of interest, however.

The first four rooms cover religious iconoclasm, from the dissolution of the monasteries to radical puritanism during the Civil War. There are some striking examples of the peculiar effect of subtractive violence upon consecrated objects, such as the retable fragments from the Church of St Mary and St Andrew, Whittlesford (c.1520). The Virgin, reduced to a head and torso, has the disembodied hand of the infant Christ suspended at her breast. This uncanny tableau anticipates the distorted bodies of subsequent developments in figurative painting. There are a number of unexpected prefigurations of the twentieth-century avant-garde, as in the *Little Gidding Harmony* (c.1635–40). This religious concordance was produced by collaging text and images from diverse sources, with uneven results resembling the layout and typography of Dadaist magazines. The correspondence between the periods is significant, insofar as the bourgeois ideology of aesthetic autonomy represents a secularized form of the ritualistic relation to sacral art. There is a hint of the modern critique of such an attitude in the description of religious iconography being repurposed as 'table tops' and 'cupboard doors', which brings to mind the notion of the 'reciprocal readymade' proposed by Marcel Duchamp: '[U]se a Rembrandt as an ironing board!'<sup>2</sup> The specifically aesthetic content of religious iconoclasm becomes visible in moments like these, but the presentation of the exhibits minimizes this aspect, instead providing a narrowly historical account.

The middle section of the exhibition deals with political iconoclasm, which, like the religious variety, is portrayed largely as an extra-aesthetic phenomenon. The first room focuses on attacks on public art, mainly examples of statue-breaking from a wide range of contexts, including popular unrest against the backdrop of the passage of the Great Reform Act, and the anti-imperialist struggles of America and Ireland. The epic quality to these actions, especially the collective destruction of oversized monuments, is not captured by the prints, photographs and footage that replace them in most cases. The better exhibits are on a smaller scale, like the collection of defaced coins from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which were either carried about as keepsakes or otherwise returned into circulation in anonymous expressions of dissent. The violence depicted here is generally directed against symbols of authority, rather than works of art as such.

The second room in this section is dedicated to the suffragettes and the slashing of Diego Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647–51) by Mary Richardson in 1914. Richardson's statement issued at the time concluded: '[U]ntil the public cease to countenance human destruction the stones cast against me for the destruction of this picture are each an evidence against them of artistic as well as moral and political humbug and hypocrisy.'<sup>3</sup> 'Art Under Attack' emphasizes her moral and political motivations above the artistic dimension of the action, concentrating on the demand in the statement for the release of Emmeline Pankhurst. The choice of a nude of the most beautiful woman in classical mythology was not incidental either, but the element of aesthetic critique in this intervention is downplayed. The painting itself is presented as no more

than a stake in a negotiation, for which any object of comparable value and renown would have served as well.

The final phase of the exhibition rehearses a triumphant narrative of the recuperation of iconoclasm by the institution of art. The tripartite structure of this section is as follows: There is a room on violence towards modern and contemporary art, including the feminist acid attack on Allen Jones's *Chair* (1969) in 1986. The political charge of this action is cancelled out by the decision to exhibit the sculpture restored to its original state: a female mannequin dressed in knee-high boots, gloves and pants made out of black leather, lying on her back with her legs pressed against her breasts and bound with straps to her body, supporting a board and a matching cushion. The next room shifts focus from the destruction *of* art to destruction *in* art, through an overview of the proceedings of the 1966 Destruction in Art Symposium, and examples of the auto-destructive creative practices of Gustav Metzger and Raphael Montañez Ortiz. The last room completes the logic of this conceptual slippage by showcasing the use of iconoclastic techniques as one style among others available to artists like the Chapman Brothers. Their working over of traditional portraits, acquired in order to be defaced as part of the ongoing series *One Day You Will No Longer Be Loved* (2006–), features prominently in the promotional material for 'Art Under Attack'. The overarching theme is the movement from iconoclasm to its co-optation, which perhaps prohibits reference to recent attacks on art such as that by Vladimir Umanets on Mark Rothko's *Black on Maroon* (1958) at Tate Modern in 2012.<sup>4</sup>

Tate Britain's own institutional status, its power to confer aesthetic value upon objects, and its role policing the modes of attention appropriate to engagement with art in the gallery space, are altogether inadequately addressed by the exhibition. There is an unintentionally humorous example of this lack of self-reflection in the explanatory blurb accompanying Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* (1966). This is the infamous pile of bricks purchased by the Tate in 1972, widely ridiculed in newspaper cartoons and under the front-page headline 'WHAT A LOAD OF RUBBISH' in the *Daily Mirror* in 1976, and subsequently splashed with blue food dye by a self-declared 'incensed taxpayer', Peter Stowell-Phillips.<sup>5</sup> The exhibition text accompanying this work concludes that it is still 'controversial' today, being 'admired' by some, and 'misunderstood' by others, glibly disqualifying the possibility of understanding but still disliking the piece. In any case its artistic merit was confirmed precisely by the extreme response it provoked and the controversy surrounding it, according to Andre.<sup>6</sup>

This question of value is central to the significance of iconoclasm. The violence of attacks on works of art in fact signals a contestation of the aesthetic value accorded to them, as illustrated by the example of the *Rokeby Venus*. Richardson was not seeking merely to generate publicity for a cause, but also to critique the subordination of women, which the ideal of beauty was used to obscure and legitimate. Likewise, *Chair's* aesthetic value was repudiated by reference to moral and political standards, but the level on which the intervention was enacted remained artistic. While the continuities between these two actions are not acknowledged, Metzger's citing of the suffragette campaign as a precursor to his auto-destructive creative practice is noted, retrospectively assimilating it to the development of art orientated around events and spectacle rather than objects. The post-war avant-garde was extraordinarily adept at transmuting the negation of value into a new form of value, and it is the culmination of this tendency which is celebrated at the end of the exhibition and on the posters advertising it, with the wholesale assimilation of iconoclasm to art represented by the Chapman Brothers.

'Art Under Attack' itself contains and neutralizes the critical force of acts of iconoclasm, which whether or not they were intended to do so always constitute a challenge to the values of official culture, not least through their violation of the codes of conduct operative in institutional contexts. The dominant model of aesthetic autonomy is literalized in the taboo on touching which becomes manifest in the anxiety of most spectators confronted with so-called interactive works. When Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV* (1969–70) was attacked in the Nationalgalerie in West Berlin in 1982, Josef Nikolaus Kleer, the perpetrator, who identified his intervention as 'action art', used as the instrument of destruction one of the plastic bars marking out the distance spectators were required to stand from the painting.<sup>7</sup> This particular intervention, as it occurred overseas, is of course out of scope. Ultimately, Tate Britain's treatment of the topic of iconoclasm subordinates it to the interest of the institution of art against which it is directed.

The question remains whether or not it would have been possible for a national gallery so deeply bound up in this institutional framework to stage such an exhibition effectively. 'Art Under Attack' could conceivably have adopted different curatorial principles, designed to highlight the inextricable enmeshment of art and politics, rather than rigorously demarcating them as it does, historicizing some iconoclastic acts to empty them of aesthetic critique, and aestheticizing others to render them safely ahistorical. However, Tate Britain was perhaps incapable of not evincing its ideological position in relation to this topic. In her foreword to the catalogue, Director Penelope Curtis gives particular prominence to the following acknowledgement: "This exhibition has been made possible by the provision of insurance through the Government Indemnity Scheme. Tate Britain would like to thank HM Government for providing Government Indemnity and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Arts Council England for arranging the indemnity".<sup>8</sup> The importance of this alternative to commercial insurance, while pointing to the wider bureaucratic and governmental context in which cultural organizations typically operate, also discloses the investment of the institution in the preservation of works of art, and its role as a guarantor of their enduring value.

Birkbeck, University of London

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Richard Dormant, 'Art Under Attack, Tate Britain, Review', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 September 2013 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10344483/Art-Under-Attack-Tate-Britain-review.html>> [accessed 14 December 2013].
  - <sup>2</sup> 'Art Under Attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm', Tate Britain, October 2013 to January 2014, Room 4; and Marcel Duchamp, cited in Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, trans. by David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), p. 89.
  - <sup>3</sup> Mary Richardson, cited in Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), p. 95.
  - <sup>4</sup> Mark Brown and Agencies, 'Man Jailed for Two Years for Vandalising £5m Rothko at Tate Modern', *Guardian*, 13 December 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/dec/13/mark-rothko-vandal-jailed>> [accessed 29 December 2013].
  - <sup>5</sup> Stacy Boldrick, 'Attacks on Art', in *Art Under Attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm*, ed. by Tabitha Barber and Stacy Boldrick, pp. 126-139 (pp. 136-137).
  - <sup>6</sup> 'Art Under Attack', Room 7.
  - <sup>7</sup> Gamboni, pp. 207-208.
  - <sup>8</sup> Penelope Curtis, 'Foreword', in *Art Under Attack*, ed. by Barber and Boldrick, p. 6.