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Sven Spieker
Introduction//The Uses of Destruction in Contemporary Art

Anti-Art from the Avant-garde to the Neo-Avant-garde
From the decomposition of traditional models of painting by arte informale artists such as Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana in the 1940s and 50s to the anti-art and media-critical practices of the 1960s, to more recent challenges to art as institution and its role in globalizing capitalism, the strategy of destruction marks a crucial step in the de-emphasis on craft and skill that has characterized the history of art since Duchamp. From then onwards, all (anti-) art has been complicit in the erosion of what the critic Peter Bürger referred to as art’s Werkcharakter, its integrity as aesthetic object. Destruction, we might say, is the point at which the art object, deprived of intrinsic aesthetic value, can only be destroyed in order to preserve, in its demise, a modicum of self-determination.

Yet perhaps this definition is either too general or too specific to account for the multifarious uses of destruction in twentieth and twenty-first-century art. For artists, destruction has often implied not merely the fight against the (art) object, but also, transversally, a fight for a new, more personal relationship with objects. The first interpretation – destruction as a form of resistance to the material object – is inexorably tied to the logic of the readymade, itself the product of a radical, and destructive, effort to analyse the logic of the art object. The second marks a less rational, animistic side of destruction: a push to eliminate the boundary that separates the artist from his/her environment and to uncover emotional energy, often irrational or repressed, in the process.

The complexities of destruction were not lost on members of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes, whose various destructive poetics constitute a foil to the more recent material explored in this anthology. An early, impactful example of this force as both destructive erasure and life-investing energy is Kazimir Malevich’s Black Square (1913), a painting that shows nothing but a black square upon a white ground. If in one sense Black Square is founded on Malevich’s negative desire to strike out the history of painting, in another sense it is conceived of as a ‘positive’ antidote to painting’s addiction to representation – a means to unleash what the artist referred to as očuščenie: ‘pure feeling’, an immaterial, sensuous substrate to which he was forging a connection.

The English word destruction comes from the Latin destruer(e) (to destroy), a compound of struere (to build) and the prefix de (away from, down from, out of) which expresses reversal, thus the literal sense is to un-build. Destruction, then, cannot be thought of without reference to its opposite – construction – suggesting that an object destroyed may also be ‘liberated’ in the process. Indeed it would not be too difficult to discover in, say, Gordon Matta-Clark’s idea of anarchitecture – his cutting, slicing and slicing of buildings, but also their subsequent partial reconstruction – both the buildings’ destruction and their liberation as objects from the constraints of architectural form.

Destruction, then, is rarely tantamount to pure negation. Its creative potential often lies precisely in its incompleteness, in the lingering references to what is being decomposed or dismembered, or, more generally, in the vestiges and traces destruction leaves behind. Think of Robert Rauschenberg’s observation on his well-known Erased de Kooning Drawing (1953). The artist had asked his esteemed colleague Willem de Kooning to give him a drawing so that he could erase it: ‘I was trying to make art and therefore I had to erase art.’ There is nothing metaphorical about Rauschenberg’s remark; wherever he deleted a line with one of his erasers, he firmly established another line that traced the shadow of the first, producing an archive of destruction. And while we may classify Erased de Kooning Drawing as a playful struggle by a younger artist with a towering father figure, it would be hard to miss the fact that Rauschenberg’s destruction also figures as an act of filial inscription, confirming our suspicion that destruction both separates and binds at one and the same time.

Destroying as Process
Destruction art, or destruction in art, arguably refers less to an ideal state of accomplished non-being – the metaphysics of total annihilation – than to the techniques designed to bring about such a state, and to their aesthetic, ethical and legal implications; in short, to a material process (this also helps explain the crucial relevance of destruction for the history of performance art). Among the process-bound techniques of destruction touched upon in this anthology we find cutting, slicing and splitting (Matta-Clark’s anarchitecture), burning (John Baldessari’s auto-cremation), blurring (Wolf Vostell), erasing (Rauschenberg), daubing, painting over, striking out (Arnulf Rainer), pulling down, ripping, sawing, shooting (Niki de Saint Phalle), acid burning, breaking and even (pre-) digesting: consider John Latham who in 1966 invited his students to join him for a dinner whose main course was famously the art critic Clement Greenberg’s 1961 edition of collected essays, Art and Culture. Chewed into a pulp, the pages were dissolved, distilled, and the fermented liquid sealed in several glass vials. Latham eventually received an overdue notice from the library and promptly attempted to return one of the filled vials. However, the library rejected the vial as unreadable. And Latham’s action, part of an effort to harness decomposition to an (anti-) pedagogy designed to circumvent the constructive pedagogical ideals of the Enlightenment, does not simply destroy its object; it switches the latter’s aggregate state from book to pulp.
The techniques of destruction mentioned above, and many others besides - explosions, crushing, compression, eradication by natural elements such as wind, fire or water - mark an elaborate archive of destruction knowledge. In some cases such insight follows the trajectories of rational negation, empowering artists to take charge of their own biography. When in 1970 John Baldessari destroyed all of his paintings made between 1953 and 1963 as a prelude to 'cremating' them, he used this auto-destructive act to mark his transition from painter to conceptual artist, confounding the widespread expectation that an artist's biography should move harmoniously from one stage of development to the next. In other cases, such as the Vienna Actionists' ritually inflicted theatre of destruction - a set of practices that convulsively responded to the artists' experiences during the Second World War - destruction intervenes directly in traumatic individual or collective histories. In yet other instances, as with the Polish-born Mexican artist Marcos Kurtycz, or with Raphael Montañez Ortiz - for whom, as Kristine Stiles writes, 'the destruction process ... created a bridge between his intellectual sources and his erotic, emotional energies' - it helps establish a connection with knowledge that exceeds the limits of rationality.

While many artists have made their destructive interventions, such as smashing, slashing, burning or cutting, inside the spaces of museums and galleries or their own studios, others have aimed at the material structure itself of art's institutions. Examples range from Swiss artist Urs Fischer's rupturing of gallery walls, such as the installation You (2007), to Berlin-based Monica Bonvicini's installing of drywall on an exhibition floor so that it would crack under the weight of visitors as they walked around (Plastered, 1998), and Liz Larner's early piece Corner Basher (1988), a mechanical sculpture that swung a ball and chain against the walls of the gallery. In 1986 Chris Burden had set a precedent for this kind of work by installing a 100-ton jack connected to a gearbox and a turnstile inside a museum. The jack pushed two large timbers out against the museum's walls. Visitors passing through the turnstile had to move it, and with each such movement the jack slightly expanded, so that if only enough people visited the exhibition it would eventually destroy the building. Burden sets off an almost imperceptible process of destruction to suggest the existence of an alternative, covert history that unfolds, as it were, in the shadow of the visible progression of art movements and masterworks that is commonly shown on museum walls.

Unlike that official history, the imperceptible movement of destruction the artist unleashes is founded not on originality and uniqueness - the signature virtues of modernism - but on repetition: the turnstile turns and turns, like the spool in the hands of Sigmund Freud's nephew, who makes his appearance in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1922), a text in which Freud famously gave himself over to speculation about what he called the death drive (Todestrieb), a tendency towards self-destruction, aggression and an organism's reduction to an an-organic state. As early as the 1960s, the radical anti-art programme of destruction was also extended to include attacks on modernism's patriarchal foundations. From 1961 to 1970 Niki de Saint Phalle created paintings by shooting at plastic bags of coloured paint embedded between a stretched canvas and amorphous coatings of white plaster. She aimed, among other things, at the myth of Oedipal (male) creativity that drives modernism from within: 'In 1961 I shot at Daddy, all men ... I shot because I was fascinated watching the painting bleed and die. I shot for that moment of magic.' Often artists have sought to take charge of archives in order to challenge male iconographic monopolies: consider Bonvicini's 1998 compilation of excerpts from auteur films of the 1950s to the 70s, Destroy She Said, or Martha Rosler's Bringing the War Home: Beautiful series (1967–72), with its violent scenes from reportage photography of the Vietnam War collaged into spreads of ideal homes from the interior decor magazine. Rosler appropriated archival images of devastation in order to demonstrate the contiguity of seemingly incompatible political and representational orders: war, on the one hand, and the 'feminine' peaceful household back home, on the other.

Creative Destruction and its Critique

The destruction of artworks, whether it occurs within the gallery setting or outside, has ramifications beyond the institutions of art, especially with respect to the law. While in the United States and Western Europe there have been a number of well-documented cases where corporate owners destroyed the (public) works they owned without much legal challenge, artists, too, have wilfully destroyed or damaged the work of other artists. In many cases this happened to challenge explicitly the questionable legal sanctity of art ownership. Such was the case in 1994 when Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei dropped a Han dynasty urn to the floor and had the act photographed, or in 1997, when Moscow actionist Alexander Brener sprayed a dollar sign over an original painting by Malevich at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. As Joan Kee argues, Ai raises the question of whether art ownership implies a moral responsibility, regardless of whether such responsibility is enshrined or not in law. In Brener's case, the artist's vandalism of a once iconiclastic and now publicly-owned piece of avant-garde art is not only an egregious prank; it's also designed to remind us of the art museum's own historical but now largely lost avant-gardist role.

At least two takes on the relationship between destruction and (capitalist) production can be imagined: one redemptive, with destruction considered an organic part of that production; the other unredeemed: here, rather than being
assimilated into the production cycle and losing its distinctive features in the process, destruction retains its 'negative' traits. The first, redemptive approach was famously championed by the economist Joseph Schumpeter who, in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), portrayed market capitalism as a structure that continuously renews itself through the programmed cyclical demise and mutation of its various constituent parts. In Schumpeter's understanding (already hinted at in Marx and Engels' 1848 *Communist Manifesto*), productive forces periodically challenge or destroy the bourgeois civilization they previously helped create. Thus the assimilation of destructive effects through a process of *schöpferische Zerstörung* (creative destruction) lies at the very heart of the capitalist enterprise.\(^{10}\)

By contrast, in the 1930s Walter Benjamin had hinged his critique of capitalism not on destruction as the counterpart to production but rather on the destructive potential within capitalist production itself, what he calls 'the destructive side of the dialectics.'\(^{11}\) With this term, Benjamin sought to capture what he viewed as the rupture in the bond that tied technology and capitalist production to the satisfaction of human needs during the industrializing nineteenth century. With the explosive expansion of production capacities during the twentieth century that bond no longer held, as technology developed energies that far outstripped all human needs. The inability to channel these energies back into (peaceful) production would lead ultimately to conflict and war. What Benjamin anticipated is something that, while it is very familiar to us today, was unthinkable to Schumpeter, namely the possibility that (capitalist) production may itself already be destructive.

At the end of the 1950s the German-born Jewish artist Gustav Metzger began to theorize his auto-destructive art, followed by experiments with self-destructing works made by pouring acid on nylon, and later by what is today recognized as the watershed Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) that he co-organized in London at the Africa Centre in 1966, with related events at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and other venues, reconvened in New York at the Judson Memorial Church, Greenwich Village, in 1968. These projects represented, among other things, an attempt to confront the postwar equivalent of Benjamin's 'destructive side of the dialectic', i.e. a military-industrial complex ratcheted up by cold-war paranoia and excess capitalization. Metzger's choice of nylon for his first experiment with painting-by-destruction was surely no coincidence: used as a new material in the Second World War for military equipment such as parachutes and flak jackets, nylon was also of course the material of women's stockings and other items of mass-produced clothing, exemplifying an amalgam of wartime destruction, postwar fetishized consumption and capitalist spectacle that became the focus of Metzger's art and of the DIAS events.

### Décollage / Destruktion

Of key importance for destruction in the 1960s was the technique of *décollage* that referred to the use of torn and often lacerated fragments of wall-posters found in urban locations. *Décollage* not only opposed the painterly aspects of the early twentieth-century *papier-collé*, it also intervened in the naturalized genealogies of developed capitalism. Not coincidentally, Vostell developed his take on what he wrote out as *dé-collage* – distinguishing himself in this way from the term's more regular transcription by Mimmo Rotella and others – from a newspaper report about a jetliner that crashed shortly after take-off (*décollage* in French). Understood literally, *décollage* (coller: glue together) means that something joined together is being forced apart, and it is in this dual sense that Vostell understood the term: as a 'take-off', or a new beginning in the form of a cataclysmic decomposition. In this way, the new beginning reveals its own prehistory, yet only at the point where that history falls apart. Unlike traditional destruction, which does not as a rule require any idea of the prehistory of the phenomenon under consideration – even though it may not explicitly exclude such knowledge – *décollage* is a historically concrete method: it suggests that a phenomenon – capitalism – be questioned in its complexity, and that its genealogy be established in precisely the way in which Nietzsche examined the history of philosophy, i.e. 'with a hammer.'\(^{12}\)

It was in this sense also that Martin Heidegger deployed the term *Destruktion* (rather than the more genuinely German *Zerstörung*) to pinpoint his re-evaluation of Cartesian ontology in *Being and Time* (1927). According to Heidegger, *Destruktion* ('destructuring') has

nothing to do with a pernicious relativizing of ontological standpoints. The destructuring has just as little the negative sense of disburdening ourselves of the ontological tradition. On the contrary, it should stake out the positive possibilities of the tradition, and that always means to fix its boundaries. ... The destructuring does not wish to bury the past in nullity; it has a positive intent. Its negative function remains tacit and indirect.\(^{13}\)

For Heidegger, the *Destruktion* of the history of ontology in philosophy is not tantamount to its annihilation, and it is in that sense not 'negative'; at the same time, destruction is not simply assimilated, as in Schumpeter's model. On the contrary, Heidegger's point is to destroy history's foundations in order to retrace its boundaries and return to it afterwards, as if to reformat those foundations in order to launch a new future from the past.\(^{14}\) *Destruktion*, much like Nietzsche's figurative hammering of the history of philosophy, involves a process that both destroys the past and seeks to rebuild from the ground up.
Destruction in the Art Margins

Like most other concepts that are considered in the northwestern hemisphere to be key for the development of global postwar art, destruction is generally associated with anti-art or institutionally critical tendencies developed in North America and Western Europe, and in response to developments that are more or less specific to these regions. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the uses of destruction in the regions peripheral to this narrative, no matter how similar they may look on the surface, responded to the same historical and aesthetic constellations. For instance, the Destruction in Art Symposium was less of an isolated event than might be thought at first glance. It had been preceded in 1961 by the exhibition 'Arte Destructivo' at Galería Iríolay, Buenos Aires, organized by Argentinian critic and artist Kenneth Kemble in collaboration with fellow Argentinian artists Jorge López Anaya, Enrique Barilari, Jorge Roiger, Antonio Seguí, Silvia Torrás and Luis Alberto Wells, several of whom later participated in DIAS. The show's invitation card depicted an old horse carriage that looked as if it had been destroyed in a collision with a car: 'Arte Destructivo' – a crucial step towards the development of conceptual art in Argentina – articulated from the perspective of the global art margins a prolific (and scandalous) anti-art position in the age of nuclear proliferation. In the tradition of Nietzsche's diagnostic philosophy (Greek διαγνώστικα: the ability to distinguish), this group of artists understood destruction not primarily as a spectacle to be consumed, or as a form of Schumpeterian schöpferische Zerstörung, but rather as a means to think through, from the specific vantage point of the Southern Cone, the contradictions and tensions of postwar capitalism and the ensuing Cold War.

To take another example, two decades after John Latham's mastication of Greenberg's art criticism, the French artist Huang Yong Ping, then working in China as one of its most provocative avant-gardists, reduced to pulp two canonical books of art history – one an influential history of Western painting; the other, a history of Chinese painting – by washing them in a washing machine for two minutes, then displaying the formless mass on a broken slab of glass balanced over a wooden box (The History of Chinese Painting and the History of Modern Western Art Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes, 1987–89). Not unlike Latham's, Huang's action aimed at the material underpinnings of art history and canon formation; yet despite its superficial similarities with the earlier work, by suggesting the breakdown of the classical opposition between East and West in a moment of forced, decomposing compression, Huang proceeds from a very different vantage point.

In formerly Communist Eastern Europe, a continued affirmation of art's autonomy – motivated, among other things, by resistance to the state-mandated doctrine of Socialist Realism – meant that destruction had a markedly different status from the West. Yet already during the second half of the 1960s, the links between individual unofficial artists from the Communist bloc and international Fluxus resulted in the sporadic use of destruction. In one of the earliest works of documented performance art in Eastern Europe, The Lunch (In Memoriam Batu Khan), organized in Budapest by Hungarian artists Tamás St. Auby (also known as Szentjóby and by other names) and Gábor Altorjáy in 1966, the destruction of objects played a central role. During the following decade, St. Auby and also the Czech artist Milan Knížák – both associated with the international Fluxus movement – used elements of destruction in works that reflected more or less explicitly on the repressive political conditions under which both worked. After the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops, St. Auby created Czechoslovak Radio, a latent act of violent defiance in the form of a brick on which he drew in chalk the outlines of a radio dial. This recalled a passive resistance tactic by members of the Czech public who were forbidden by the Soviet-controlled army to listen to radio broadcasts. They attached antennae to bricks, pretending to listen to them, and the army found themselves continuously confiscating bricks instead of radios.

Knížák used elements of destruction to create what he termed 'broken music' by playing gramophone records either too fast or too slowly, and then partially damaging or destroying them in various ways. Knížák's actions – part of an engagement by artists with what Caleb Kelly has termed 'cracked media' – bypassed the official monopoly on transcription and recording procedures, creating a material (sound) sculpture through a process of de-composition.16 Knížák's actions were part of a more general push in both the eastern and western branches of the Fluxus movement to develop further John Cage's early experiments investigating the materiality of sound and its production. While Nam June Paik famously smashed a violin in Of for Violin (Solo) (1962), Maciunas' Piano Piece No. 13 for Nam June Paik (1964) involved the nailing down of every key on an upright piano with a hammer, combining the destructive sounds of the hammering with the dying sounds of the piano's internal hammers as they hit their strings for the last time. Another of the numerous Fluxus events involving the destruction of a musical instrument was composer Philip Corner's performance Piano Activities (1962) at a Fluxfest in Wiesbaden, during which Maciunas and his friends dismantled the piano. As Maciunas wrote, 'at the end we did Corner's Piano Activities not according to his instructions, since we systematically destroyed a piano which I bought for $5 and had to have it all cut up to throw it away.'17 Corner's score – one of several by the composer involving a piano's destruction – had asked performers, among other things, to produce sounds through scratching, rubbing or striking the instrument, by using its underside, or by dragging objects across its surface.
Destructive Ecologies

While various strands of anti-art and destruction-inflected animism have been decisive for destruction in twentieth and early twenty-first-century art, artists have extended these uses to include what one might term destructive ecologies. Since the 1960s artists in many parts of the world have located artistic production in a natural environment perceived to be increasingly under threat. Yet where ecological destruction was formerly viewed as a result of technical operations visited upon nature, conceived of as external, in more recent projects what is natural and what is the result of human fabrication can no longer reliably be separated from each other, resulting in a realization that the environment itself can assume destructive qualities. Crucial to these projects is the technique of scaling, a way of presenting large-scale destructive phenomena on a lesser scale, yet in real time. Contemporary artists as diverse as William Pope.L, Song Dong and Olafur Eliasson have created projects where degrading changes in the natural, economic or social environment – the melting of the ice cap at the earth’s poles; the erosion of democratic institutions; or the process of relentless urbanization in many parts of the globe – are mapped onto scale models that perform these processes in a real-time environment that includes the onlookers themselves, who are exposed to these effects and become complicit in their production.

Consider the large chunk of ice that Eliasson transferred from a fjord in Greenland to the square in front of Copenhagen’s City Hall (Ice Watch, 2014), coinciding with publication of a report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The block of ice slowly melted away as a result of its change of environment, which included being touched by the hands of the public as they engaged with the artwork. In this instance the ice’s erosion is manifestly not the result of a wilful destructive act on the part of the artist, even though Eliasson arranged for the block’s transfer; nor is the project designed to reflect on art, its object or its institutions; rather, the ice block’s gradual melting models, in an urban environment that is itself complicit in the phenomenon of global warming, the conditions under which such melting occurs in the Arctic. By relocating the ice to Copenhagen, Eliasson shows a scaled-down version of the massive melting process underway in nature, making the danger of global warming palpable as the ice literally disappears before the fingers of passers-by.

We encounter a similarly scaled-down version of a real-time process of environmental destruction in two recent works by US performance artist William Pope.L., who has subjected seemingly universal political symbols to decomposition. In his installation Trinket (2008), Pope.L uses giant electric fans gradually to blow a vasty oversized US flag into tattered shreds, while in a video work of the same year Small Cup (a pun on cupola), live goats and chickens in a disused Maine factory graze and peck at a feed-covered, hut-sized scale model of Washington’s Capitol Building with its famous cupola, gradually toppling it so that it bursts apart, turning into an earthquake-like ruin. On one hand, Pope.L returns the US flag and Capitol from the status of dead symbols associated with a sclerotic political process to that of live, pulsing entities. On the other, their presence is inextricable from their entropic destruction.

Driven by a sense of loss over the many buildings sacrificed to urban development in his home city of Beijing, Song Dong has variously sought to create visceral correlates of the destruction that is the price China pays for its economic boom, using a scale model to sensitize his audiences to the lasting effects of accelerated urbanization and mass consumption. In Eating the City (2006), Song invited gallery visitors to eat the scale model of a large city that could be their own. While Song’s edible city tasted sweet and may momentarily pacify our sadness over the loss of ancient cityscape to urban development, such consolation comes at a price: not only are we forced to deal with considerable sugar intake; the cityscape’s consumption also gradually destroys the model before our very eyes as pleasurable consumption and destruction are inseparably intertwined.

In all three cases – Eliasson, Pope.L and Song – destruction works effectively to bury Schumpeterian ‘creative destruction’ once and for all, as nothing can help us reintegrate destruction within the capitalist production model of the twentieth century, one in which human agency confronted the natural environment as an absolute outside, and where destruction was squarely considered a technical issue.

Far from aiming at a final, summary statement, this anthology suggests that in its various manifestations – from reflections on 1960s anti-art to the critique of art’s commodity status and the animistic recovery of emotional energy – destruction is far from being a resolved issue in the emerging history of contemporary art.

1 See Pamela M. Lee, Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999); excerpt reprinted in this volume, 139.
4 The resulting artwork, retitled and dated upon acquisition as Still and ChewJet and Culture (1968–69), is now in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
5 Kristine Stiles, Introduction, Rafael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior 1960, Years of the Psyche 1988 (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1988) [Ortiz grew up with the first name Ralph and was thus known in the 1960s at the time of DIAS; he was called Rafael during the years of establishing the Museo del Barrio; since then he has chosen Raphael]; extract reprinted in this volume, 77.

6 In this context, the campaigns against 'artwashing' and neoliberal gentrification that are under way in several cities around the world – accusing commercial galleries of destroying the neighbourhoods in which they operate, and attacking their premises – may be considered either as a continuation of the long history of institutional critique by destructive means, or as the ultimate discrediting of that critique. See, for example, Boyle Heights Alliance against Artwashing and Displacement, 'LA Onda: Passt Stinks!' at http://atlantacontraartwashing.org/en/coalition-statements/l-a-onda/


8 See Joan Kee, 'The Law in Our Hands', Brooklyn Rail, vol. 18, no. 2 (February 2016). (www.brooklynrail.org); reprinted in this volume, 223.


10 In a study devoted to the history of Saint Peter's in Rome, art historian Horst Bredekamp used Schumpeter's concept to explain the halting construction process of the cathedral, taking into account the fact that the individual architects who built the church over the centuries invariably resorted to destroying their predecessors' work before embarking on their own. In Bredekamp's art-historical production model, the destructive phases in the history of Saint Peter's function as dialectical extensions of the periods of production; taken together, both affirm a totalizing cycle of productivity that encompasses even destruction itself. Horst Bredekamp, Sankt Peter und das Prinzip der kreativen Zerstörung: Bau und Abbau von Bramante bis Bernini (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2008).


12 In The Twilight of the Gods, or How to Philosophy Using a Hammer (1889), Nietzsche refers to the hammer in the philosopher's hands as having a double function: first, as the tool of choice for wrecking the history of philosophy, and second, as a diagnostic tool: 'Finally to pose questions with a hammer, and sometimes to hear as a reply that famous hollow sound that can only come from bloated entrails – what a delight for one who has ears even behind his ears [...] before whom just that which would remain silent must finally speak out.' Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).


16 The word sculpture is derived from Latin sculpere: to carve. In vinyl recording, the 'carving' of the grooves creates the record.


IT BECOMES CONCEIVABLE THAT ANY FORM OF ERASURE, HOWEVER VIOLENTLY DESTRUCTIVE, CAN BE SEEN AS CONSTRUCTIVE IN SOME WAY

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels
Manifesto of the Communist Party//1848

[... ] All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature.

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production. [...]}

Walter Benjamin
Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian//1937

[... ] The questions which humanity brings to nature are in part conditioned by the level of production. This is the point at which positivism fails. Positivism was only able to see the progress of natural science in the development of technology, but failed to recognize the concomitant retrogression of society. Positivism overlooked the fact that this development was decisively conditioned by capitalism. By the same token, the positivists among the Social Democratic theorists failed to understand that the increasingly more urgent act which would
bring the proletariat into possession of this technology was rendered more and more precarious because of this development. They misunderstood the destructive side of this development because they were alienated from the destructive side of dialectics.

A prognosis was due but failed to materialize. That failure concluded a process characteristic of the past century: the miscarried reception of technology. It consists of a series of energetic, constantly renewed efforts, all attempting to overcome the fact that technology serves this society only by producing commodities. At the beginning there were the Saint-Simonians with their industrial poetry. They are followed by the realism of a Du Camp who sees the locomotive as the saint of the future. Finally there is a Ludwig Pfau: ‘it is quite unnecessary to become an angel’, he wrote, ‘since a locomotive is worth more than the nicest pair of wings.’ This image of technology comes from the Gartenlaube. This may cause one to ask whether the Gemütlichkeit [contentedness] which the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie enjoyed does not arise from the hollow comfort of never having to experience how the productive forces had to develop under their hands. This experience was really reserved for the following century. The present century experiences how the speed of traffic machines and the capacities of apparatuses for duplicating words and writing outstrip human needs. The energies which technology develops beyond this threshold are destructive. First of all, they advance the technology of war and its propagandistic preparation. One might say of this development, which was thoroughly class conditioned, that it occurred behind the backs of the last century. That century was not yet conscious of the destructive energies of technology. This is especially true for the Social Democrats at the turn of the century. If they occasionally criticized and opposed the illusions of positivism, they remained largely trapped by them. For them the past appeared to have been gathered up and stored forever in the sheds of the present. Although the future held the promise of work ahead, it also held the certitude of a blessed harvest. […]

Friedrich Nietzsche
On the Genealogy of Morals//1887

[...] ‘What are you really doing, erecting an ideal or knocking one down?’, I may be asked.

But have you ever asked yourselves sufficiently how much the erection of every ideal on earth has cost? How much reality has had to be misunderstood and slandered, how many lies have had to be sanctified, how many consciences disturbed, how much ‘God’ sacrificed each time? If a temple is to be erected a temple must be destroyed: that is the law – let anyone who can, show me a case in which it is not fulfilled! […]


Martin Heidegger
Being and Time//1927

[...] If the question of being is to achieve clarity regarding its own history, a loosening of the sclerotic tradition and a dissolving of the concealments produced by it is necessary. We understand this task as the destructuring of the traditional content of ancient ontology, which is to be carried out along the guidelines of the question of being. This destructuring is based upon the original experiences in which the first and subsequently guiding determinations of being were gained.

This demonstration of the provenance of the fundamental ontological concepts, as the investigation which displays their ‘birth certificate’, has nothing to do with a pernicious relativizing of ontological standpoints. The destructuring has just as little the negative sense of disburdening ourselves of the ontological tradition. On the contrary, it should stake out the positive possibilities of the tradition, and that always means to fix its boundaries. These are factually given with the specific formulation of the question and the prescribed demarcation of the possible field of investigation. Negatively, the destructuring is not even related to the past: its criticism concerns ‘today’ and the dominant way we treat the history of ontology, whether it be conceived as the history of opinions, ideas

1 [Die Gartenlaube (The Arbou) was a weekly illustrated family journal, founded in 1853.]
or problems. However, the destructuring does not wish to bury the past in nullity; it has a positive intent. Its negative function remains tacit and indifferent.

The destructuring of the history of ontology essentially belongs to the formulation of the question of being, and is possible solely within such a formulation. Within the scope of this treatise, which has as its goal a fundamental elaboration of the question of being, the destructuring can be carried out only with regard to the fundamentally decisive stages of this history.

In accord with the positive tendency of the destructuring, the question must first be asked whether, and to what extent in the course of the history of ontology in general, the interpretation of being has been thematically connected with the phenomenon of time. We must also ask whether the range of problems concerning temporality which necessarily belongs here was fundamentally worked out or could have been. Kant is the first and only one who traversed a stretch of the path towards investigating the dimension of temporality – or allowed himself to be driven there by the compelling force of the phenomena themselves. Only when the problem of temporality is pinned down can we succeed in casting light on the obscurity of his doctrine of schematism. Furthermore, in this way we can also show why this area had to remain closed to Kant in its real dimensions and in its central ontological function. Kant himself knew that he was venturing forth into an obscure area: 'This schematism of our understanding as regards appearances and their mere form is an art hidden in the depths of the human soul, the true devices of which are hardly ever to be divined from Nature and laid uncovered before our eyes.' What it is that Kant shrinks back from here, as it were, must be brought to light, thematically and in principle, if the expression ‘being’ is to have a demonstrable meaning. Ultimately the phenomena to be explicated in the following analysis under the rubric of ‘temporality’ are precisely those that determine the most covert judgements of ‘common reason’, analysis of which Kant calls the ‘business of philosophers’.

In pursuing the task of destructuring on the guideline of the problem of temporality the following treatise [Being and Time] will attempt to interpret the chapter on the schematism and the Kantian doctrine of time developed there. At the same time we must show why Kant could never gain insight into the problem of temporality. Two things prevented this insight. On the one hand, the neglect of the question of being in general, and in connection with this, the lack of a thematic ontology of Da-sein - in Kantian terms, the lack of a preliminary ontological analytic of the subjectivity of the subject. Instead, Kant dogmatically adopted Descartes' position - notwithstanding all his essential advances. Despite his taking this phenomenon back into the subject, however, his analysis of time remains oriented towards the traditional, common understanding of it. It is this that finally prevented Kant from working out the phenomenon of a ‘transcendental determination of time’ in its own structure and function. As a consequence of this double-effect of the tradition, the decisive connection between time and the ‘I think’ remained shrouded in complete obscurity. It did not even become a problem. […]

1 [Heidegger’s usage of the common German word for existence, Da-sein, literally, ‘being/to be there’, is left untranslated by scholars; it shifts in his work from a sense of the human condition to the less humanistic sense of a ‘there’ of existence.]


Walter Benjamin
The Destructive Character//1931

It could happen to someone looking back over his life that he realized that almost all the deeper obligations he had endured in its course originated in people who, everyone agreed, had the traits of a ‘destructive character’. He would stumble on this fact one day, perhaps by chance, and the heavier the shock dealt to him, the better his chances of representing the destructive character.

The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred. The destructive character is young and cheerful. For destroying rejuvenates, because it clears away the traces of our own age; it cheers, because everything cleared away means to the destroyer: a complete reduction, indeed a rooting out, of his own condition. Really, only the insight into how radically the world is simplified, when tested for its worthiness for destruction, leads to such an Apollonian image of the destroyer. This is the great bond embracing and unifying all that exists. It is a sight that affords the destructive character a spectacle of deepest harmony.

The destructive character is always blithely at work. It is Nature that dictates his tempo, indirectly at least, for he must forestall her. Otherwise she will take over the destruction herself.

The destructive character sees no image hovering before him. He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed. First of all, for a moment at least, empty space – the place where the
thing stood, or the victim lived. Someone is sure to be found who needs this space without occupying it.

The destructive character does his work; the only work he avoids is creative. Just as the creator seeks solitude, the destroyer must be constantly surrounded by people, witnesses to his efficacy.

The destructive character is a signal. Just as a trigonometric sign is exposed on all sides to the wind, so he is exposed to idle talk. To protect him from it is pointless.

The destructive character has no interest in being understood. Attempts in this direction he regards as superficial. Being misunderstood cannot harm him. On the contrary, he provokes it, just as oracles, those destructive institutions of the state, provoked it. The most petty bourgeois of all phenomena, gossip, comes about only because people do not wish to be misunderstood. The destructive character tolerates misunderstanding; he does not promote gossip.

The destructive character is the enemy of the etui-man.1 The etui-man looks for comfort, and the case is its quintessence. The inside of the case is the velvety-lined trace that he has imprinted on the world. The destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction.

The destructive character stands in the front line of traditionalists. Some people pass things down to posterity, by making them untouched and thus conserving them; others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive.

The destructive character has the consciousness of historical man, whose deepest emotion is an insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognize that everything can go wrong. Therefore, the destructive character is reliability itself.

The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined. Because he sees ways everywhere, he always stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it.

The destructive character lives from the feeling, not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble.

1 [Étui: a small ornamental case for sewing implements or cosmetics, etc.]


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Joseph A. Schumpeter
The Process of Creative Destruction//1942

[...] The essential point to grasp is that in dealing with capitalism we are dealing with an evolutionary process. It may seem strange that anyone can fail to see so obvious a fact, which moreover was long ago emphasized by Karl Marx. Yet that fragmentary analysis which yields the bulk of our propositions about the functioning of modern capitalism persistently neglects it. Let us restate the point and see how it bears upon our problem.

Capitalism, then, is by nature a form or method of economic change and not only never is but never can be stationary. And this evolutionary character of the capitalist process is not merely due to the fact that economic life goes on in a social and natural environment which changes and by its change alters the data of economic action; this fact is important and these changes (wars, revolutions, and so on) often condition industrial charge, but they are not its prime movers. Nor is this evolutionary character due to a quasi-automatic increase in population and capital, or to the vagaries of monetary systems of which exactly the same thing holds true. The fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion comes from the new consumers' goods, the new methods of production or transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organization that capitalist enterprise creates.

[The contents of the labourer's budget, say from 1760 to 1940, did not simply grow on unchanging lines but underwent a process of qualitative change. Similarly, the history of the productive apparatus of a typical farm, from the beginnings of the rationalization of crop rotation, plowing and fattening to the mechanized thing of today – linking up with elevators and railroads – is a history of revolutions. So is the history of the productive apparatus of the iron and steel industry, from the charcoal furnace to our own type of furnace, or the history of the apparatus of power production from the overshot water wheel to the modern power plant, or the history of transportation from the mail coach to the airplane. The opening up of new markets, foreign or domestic, and the organizational development from the craft shop and factory to such concerns as US Steel illustrate the same process of industrial mutation – if I may use that biological term – that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in.]...