



VIEWPOINT: Vandalism and Other Matters of the Heart

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by Joan Altabe

When John Keats poeticized that art was about truth, he probably wasn't considering that art could also be the victim of a bitter truth as old as the Seven Hills of Rome – vandalism. The word stems from an invasion of the Eternal City by a Germanic tribe of Vandals who destroyed a ton of art. Attacks like these have been going on ever since.

Recent outbreaks include the [splashing of red paint on a Whitney Museum wall](#) near the sculpture *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* at the Jeff Koons retrospective, and the [smashing of a vase by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei](#) at the Pérez Art Museum Miami.



Vandalism by Istvan Kantor at the Jeff Koons Retrospective at the Whitney in NYC. Photo: Antoine S Lutens, via Facebook & news.artnet.com.

While it's chancy to presume motives, many of these offenses, like others through time, appear to be acts of protest. The vase-breaker, a Miami artist, said he objected to the exclusion of Miami artists at the Pérez. No motive was given for the red paint at the Whitney, but it's not inconceivable that it was a protest of the astronomically high prices that Koons sets—and gets—for his work.

Still, beyond protest, what drives the attacks?

A former art student of mine who used to mark up New York subway cars did some of his best work underground. Wielding aerosol paint cans with great skill and power he pictured bustling figures with a steamy air that set off applause from fellow strap-hangers.

Their enthusiasm made sense. The subway experience, after all, can turn riders into the Tin Man—heartless—avoiding one another's eyes, like those impassive stares from diners in Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks," alienated from the world around them. Seeing the student's graffiti on the subway cars seemed less an act of vandalism and more a way to humanize the hugest rapid transit system on earth. It became a kind of public service.

Ok, ok. Spray-painting rail cars isn't the same as doing it to fine art; although graffiti has since risen

up from the street to fine art exhibition halls. The Museum of the City of New York called its recent graffiti show "[City as Canvas](#)". And museum director Susan Henshaw Jones tags it "an urban statement."

The "statement" tag gets to motive and why art vandals do what they do.

Setting aside mentally ill vandals, like the escaped patient in 1999 who [razored a hole in the middle of Picasso's "Woman Nude Before Garden"](#) at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art, let's talk motive.

In terms of protest, last year a female visitor to the Louvre in Lens, a northern French town struggling with high unemployment, marked up the base of Eugene Delacroix's painting "Liberty Leading the People." Liberty is pictured as a bare-breasted female raising the tricolor of the French flag in battle. Her exposed anatomy is a likely reminder that she is the mother of France. The vandal may have been channeling Liberty's militarism, although she kept her shirt on.

Religious fervor also seems to spur vandalism.

In 1999, a devout Catholic obliterated with white paint the virgin in Chris Ofili's "The Holy Virgin Mary" at the Brooklyn Museum, contending the work was "blasphemous."

And in 2011 Andre Serrano's photograph of a cross submerged in a jar of urine titled "Piss Christ" on view at Art Collection Lambert, a contemporary art museum in Avignon, upset French Catholic fundamentalists, [who smashed it with hammers](#).

One might well wonder if that would have happened If Serrano used a different title for his otherwise gorgeously glowing image of urine illuminating the cross, which he intended as Christianity drowning in crassness, in commercialism.

While the title of "Piss Christ" alone can piss people off for obvious reasons, and it's equally easy to see why Ofili's "The Holy Virgin Mary" could drive someone to destroy it, what triggers the many attacks on something as well-liked as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*? Statements from vandals of the portrait indicate they used its prominence to air personal grievances.

In 1974 a lame woman attending an exhibit of the *Mona Lisa* at the Toyko National Museum sprayed red paint at it in anger over the museum's policy for access for the disabled.

In 2009, a Russian woman at the Louvre hurled a ceramic mug at the *Mona Lisa* out of fury that the French had denied her citizenship.

Clearly, the celebrity status of the *Mona Lisa*—it draws six million visitors each year and is said to be the most famous painting in the world—allows protesters sure-fire exposure for their outcries, and art be damned.

Using Leonardo's portrait to make a statement has occurred even without spray paint or a ceramic cup being thrown at it. Call it virtual vandalism. I'm thinking of Time magazine, which once ran a *Mona Lisa* with a "Breathe Right" strip across the subject's nose. The French also have used *Mona Lisa* to exhort people to give blood. ("I, too, am priceless. Give blood today.") Even in its Italian

birthplace, the painting has been used to sell hairpins. Leonardo's painting. Really.

Virtual vandalism runs freely in the movies, too. Christian Bale in the 2002 movie "Equilibrium" set the *Mona Lisa* on fire, along with a lot of other art.

A missile attack in "Team America: World Police" (2004) zapped Mona and everything else in the Louvre.

You don't have to be a philistine to disrespect art. Even artists have used the portrait to suit their own agenda.

[Marcel Duchamp](#)'s "readymades" put mundane objects not usually thought of as art in art exhibits—like the actual porcelain men's urinal he called "Fountain." And on a cheap postcard reproduction of *Mona Lisa* he penciled a mustache and goatee and called it "Shaved."

British artist [Caroline Shotton](#) in 2007 also called attention to herself by painting the portrait as a cow and naming it *Moo-na Lisa*.

Can it be that the popularity of Leonardo's portrait makes it mundane enough to mess with? Or is it safer to just say that art vandalism—virtual or otherwise—has little to do with art?

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