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Under Destruction I-III

Nina Beier and Marie Lund, Monica Bonvicini, Pavel Büchler, Nina Canell, Jimmie Durham, Alex Hubbard, Alexander Gutke, Martin Kersels, Michael Landy, Liz Lerner, Christian Marclay, Kris Martin, Ariel Orozco, Michael Sailstorfer, Arcangelo Sassolino, Jonathan Schipper, Ariel Schlesinger, Roman Signer, Johannes Vogl

Curated by Gianni Jetzer and Chris Sharp

Under Destruction is a group exhibition featuring 20 internationally renowned contemporary artists that examine the use and role of destruction in today's art. Fifty-one years after Swiss artist Jean Tinguely's historic auto-destructive machine *Homage to New York* at MoMA (1960) the present exhibition proposes a series of alternative approaches to a theme traditionally associated with the more spectacular and inherently protest-oriented work of Jean Tinguely, Gustav Metzger and others throughout the 50s and 60s.

Rosalind Krauss' succinct summary of Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share* (1949), "If nothing can be created, something must be destroyed," goes a long way in describing the ethos of *Under Destruction*. And yet the exhibition also seeks to raise the stakes normally associated with such a deleterious theme by exploring the various modes of destruction in art and, more importantly, addressing to what ends they are implemented. Indeed, the exhibition reflects on the subject from a series of angles, perceiving destruction as everything from generative force to environmental *memento mori*, from consumer fallout to a form of poetic transformation.

Predominantly kinetic, the exhibition consists primarily of works whose mechanisms often reveal themselves in real time to the viewer. The strikingly spectacular nature of some works is complemented by an unexpected sense for subtlety and quietude in others, the combination of both progressively revealing the rich diversity of destruction in contemporary art.

Initially presented at the Museum Tinguely in Basel in one large exhibition in 2010, *Under Destruction* will be divided into three successive chapters for its incarnation at Swiss Institute. Varying significantly from one another, each chapter will feature works loosely grouped together as much according to theme as to mood, and, although each chapter will function as an autonomous exhibition, three separate visits will be required to grasp the exhibition as a whole. This factor inevitably reflects the progressive, time-based nature of its subject matter while describing the narrative arc that links the three parts together.

Under Destruction, Chapter I

Nina Beier and Marie Lund, Monica Bonvicini, Pavel Büchler, Nina Canell, Alex Hubbard, and Michael Sailstorfer

April 6 to May 8 2011

Opening Tuesday April 5, 6–8PM

The first part introduces destruction in some of its subtlest forms, exhibiting works whose destructive character and process seem to be either all but concealed or carefully controlled.

Nina Canell's discreet *Perpetuum Mobile (40 kg)* (2009-2010) breaks down destruction to some of its finest, molecular components in a kinetic installation in which water is transformed into a mist via sonic vibrations, which then gradually hardens a nearby sack of cement.

Pavel Büchler's series *Modern Paintings* (1999-2000) dissimulates a no less mechanical act into so many visual clichés of abstraction. Reminiscent of generic modern art, the series is culled from flea-market bought paintings which are un-stretched, inserted in a washer, and reconstituted by the artist on a stretcher such that they resemble Art Brut abstractions.

Alex Hubbard's contemporary classic *Cinépolis* (2007), ironically underpinned by the principles of action painting and the flashy aesthetics of Pop Art, is a fitting counterpart to Büchler's period pieces. Accompanied by a Foley soundtrack, this video portrays Hubbard subjecting a small movie screen to a series of ruinous gestures, such as torching a group of metallic balloons and then tarring and feathering the screen.

Although effectively destroyed, Monica Bonvicini's *White* (2003), which consists of a cube of fractured safety glass, housing a square armature of illuminated neon tubes, nonetheless seeks to resist destruction, which will be unequivocal in the two following works.

The centripetal attrition of Nina Beier and Marie Lund's *History Makes a Young Man Old* (2008) is complemented by the instantaneous, centrifugal explosion in Micheal Sailstorfer's *Untitled (Bulb)* (2010). Although the former departs from the theme of technology, it is nevertheless driven by an idea that becomes a machine (to make art), using performance to facilitate a sense of deterioration wrought by time and use. For this piece, the artists direct the curators to roll a crystal ball from wherever it is purchased in the city of the exhibition venue to the exhibition site itself, an idiosyncratic odyssey, which inevitably renders the ball opaque and unseeing and thus turned irreversibly inward. Sailstorfer's transfer of an HD video to a 16mm projection on the other hand, which depicts the super slow motion explosion of a light bulb shot by an air rifle, expands evocatively outward. At once a *memento mori* and an allegory of creation, the piece presages the more spectacular mode of destruction to come in chapter two.

Under Destruction, Chapter II

Jimmie Durham, Martin Kersels, Michael Landy, Liz Larner, Christian Marclay, Ariel Orozco, Arcangelo Sassolino, Roman Signer, and Johannes Vogl

May 18 to June 19 2011

Opening Tuesday May 17, 6–8PM

Part two is more oriented toward cyclical issues of consumption and spectacle. It can be seen as the crescendo of the exhibition. Here, destruction assumes the more aggressive and dramatic character one might normally associate with it.

Among the works that more directly engage the question of consumption can be found Johannes Vogl's absurd, homemade contraption *Untitled (Machine To Produce Jam Breads, 2007)* which produces pieces of bread with jam on them and thus addresses questions of overproduction and consequently waste.

Ariel Orozco's *Doble Desgaste* (2005) takes a more metaphysical approach toward consumption, speaking to the vain and deliberate dissipation of effort. In this photographic documentation of an "action", Orozco systematically draws a portrait of a cube shaped eraser in graphite, photographs the portrait, erases it with the same eraser, redraws the eraser on the same piece of paper, photographs it, erases it, and so on until the eraser and the portrait are gone.

Michael Landy's uneasy relationship with the artificial, accumulative identity of consumption is addressed in the video documentation of his celebrated work *Breakdown* (2001), in which the artist had all 7,227 of his possessions, classified, dismantled, and destroyed in a department store in central London. The consequences of consumption also unavoidably filter into the issues of environment and technology.

Arcangelo Sassolino's *Untitled* (2007) perceives technology as a brute, destructive force, which cannot be disassociated from environmental issues. A hydraulic arm that gradually pushes into and senselessly destroys a large block of wood, *Untitled* consumes with a methodical and massive appetite.

Liz Larner's *Corner Basher* (1988) could be said, at least in part, to consume the architecture in which it finds itself. This piece consists of a drive shaft mechanism that swings a ball and chain into the nearby corner wall. The activation and speed of the machine is controlled by the viewer.

The circularity of this work is carried to another (il)logical extreme in Martin Kersel's video *Pink Constellation* (2001). This video features the artist and alternatively a dancer negotiating the topples and turns of a room, which has been outfitted with the accoutrements of a teenage girl, as it rotates end over end, thus transfiguring the somersaulting contents into unrecognizable dreck.

The slapstick humor of this piece finds a rather dry counterpart in Jimmie Durham's classic sculpture *St. Frigo* (1996) and its corresponding video installation, *Stoning the Refrigerator* (1996). The result of beginning his daily routine for ten days in a row by throwing cobblestones at a refrigerator for one hour, this piece speaks to an iconoclastic form of destruction as a daily, self-affirmative ritual. This demolishing element of comedy becomes rather dramatic in the final two works in this part of the exhibition.

Where Christian Marclay's video installation *Guitar Drag* (2000), which consists of imagery and a thunderous soundtrack of a guitar being dragged behind a pickup truck, is rich in harrowing association, Roman Signer's video *Stuhl* (Chair, 2002) is rife with a bracing pathos. The video depicts a chair, which has been attached to the rotating mechanism of a water mill being dragged to its inexorable end, as if in a parody of some medieval form of capital punishment.

Under Destruction, Chapter III

Alexander Gutke, Kris Martin, Jonathan Schipper, Ariel Schlesinger, and Roman Signer

June 29 to August 7 2011

Opening Tuesday June 28, 6–8PM

The third and final part can be read as the dénouement of the exhibition. Paired down to a comparatively restrained, but no less powerful selection of works, it foregrounds the theme of the memento mori present in all three parts.

Ariel Schlesinger's *Untitled (Bubble Machine)* (2006) gradually signals its own destruction through its repetitive and inflammatory nature. Consisting of a hand-drill mechanism placed on top of a wooden ladder, the machine periodically drops bubbles of soap onto an electrified field of coils, which in turn makes the bubble burst into a fleeting sphere of flames.

Fire likewise plays a deleterious role in Roman Signer's *Ramp* (2008). Having constructed an elaborate wooden ramp, Signer condemns a small truck to its death by sending it down the precipitous ramp (the trigger mechanism of the whole affair being a candle which burns through the rope which in turn releases the truck to its doomed fate).

Of an entirely different, much more measured register is Jonathan Schipper's *To Dust* (2009), in which two generic cement busts, which are hung upside down from a mechanism, gradually grind against each other, mutually transforming one another into dust.

Alexander Gutke's *The White Light of the Void* (2002) concisely invests the materiality of celluloid with a purchase on the hereafter. This 16mm film installation simulates the meltdown of blank film stock, as if the film jammed in the projector, whereupon the bulb promptly burns through the celluloid. This small conflagration in turn produces an amoeba-like form that expands outward from the centre of the frame, swallowing it up and returning the film to its opening white frame, intact, and the loop resumes. If this work can be seen as a metaphor for the entire exhibition in which destruction itself is often no more than a force of cyclical renewal.

Kris Martin's *100 years* (2004) ultimately embodies the deferral intrinsic to that cycle. Indeed, this work, which quite simply consists of a bomb set to go off in 2104, dislocates the moment of destruction into a distant temporal elsewhere, thereby depriving an exhibition that would seem to be comprised of nothing but ends, of an end itself.