

Defacement, curated by Amanda Schmitt

INTRODUCTION

In 1961, Asger Jorn and Jacqueline de Jong (artists and original members of the Situationist International) began working on a multi-volume publication of photographic picture books called the *Institute for Comparative Vandalism* which aimed to understand how the evolving defacement of Northern European cultural objects and edifices could alter and supersede the meaning of the artifacts that were vandalized (per se). The Institute was focused on illustrating how this vandalism was driven by aesthetic, artistic forces without any concrete reasons: an artistic vandalism without political, violent, dictatorial or revolutionary motivations. In Jorn's purview, this concept is aligned with the classic situationist strategy of *détournement*, the "integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu,"¹ and was further explored in the publication *The Situationist Times* (published and edited by de Jong from 1962-67).

In Jorn's own words, "Détournement is a game made possible by the capacity of devaluation. Only he who is able to devalorize can create new values...It is up to us to devalorize or to be devalorized according to our ability to reinvest in our own culture."² In short, one must sacrifice the past to make way for the future.

Détournement is closely related to defacement –as illustrated in this exhibition-- in which both the source and the meaning of the original subject or object are subverted to create a new work. The artworks in *Defacement* thus fulfill Jorn's premise of vandalism and the collective situationist notion of *détournement*, while also investigating the concept as explored by anthropologist Michael Taussig in his eponymous book, asking what surfaces when an artist defaces the surface?

One of the most notorious examples of defacement is illustrated in Guy Debord's graffiti, "Ne Travaillez Jamais," scrawled on a public embankment in Paris in 1963. In order to understand Defacement, we must understand the complex term, vandalism, an action involving deliberate destruction or damage to public or private property (such as a graffiti). Vandalism connotes a dirty word, as does appropriation: the action of taking something for one's own use, typically without the rightful author or owner's permission. To vandalize is to steal or destroy; the works in *Defacement*, however, *détourn* the connotation of this action and investigate both the meaning of an image or object's destruction and its revalorization. Defacement, as diametric to vandalism, iconoclasm or desecration, revalues, rather than devalues. Presented in *Defacement* is work by twelve contemporary artists in which the artist has executed an incisive attack on the surface or original image in order to alter, subvert, or deface: to revalorize a new form, reading or meaning.

¹ McDonough, Tom. "Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents". October Books, MIT Press, 2002.

² Jorn, Asger. *Détourned Painting*, 1959.

EXHIBITION WALK-THROUGH

Jacqueline de Jong is an original member of the Situationist International and subsequently initiated *The Situationist Times*, for which she was editor/publisher from 1962-1967. Who better to illustrate the act of defacement than an original collaborator of the SI and a master of *détournement* herself. In her series, “Potato Blues,” de Jong starts with a high-resolution photographs of the most earthly beings, shriveled potato sprouts, and proceeds to elaborate upon the image with fantastical illustrations in acerbic colors such as fuschia and lime green, rendering the sprouts unrecognizable in the compositions’ final forms. The act of defacement transforms the humble potato into a great work of art. De Jong, along with Jorn, has long held a fascination with “primitive” mark-making, going back 10,000 years and more, for what could be more primitive than a potato spud? Ironically, coinciding with the timeline that the Institute for Comparative Vandalism focused on, the cultivation of potatoes, as agriculture, is dated back approximately 10,000 years (on the South American continent) . [No.6, 7]

Also demonstrating that the situationist strategy of *détournement* is alive and well, this exhibition presents a new work by de Jong, *The Shredded Fakesimile*, [No.4] a destroyed copy of Boo Hooray’s 2012 facsimile publication of six issues of the original *Situationist Times*. Unsatisfied with various —and unauthorized— outcomes of the facsimile edition, de Jong presents a completely destroyed copy of the work along with accompanying *erratum*, demonstrating where the facsimile went wrong and leading her to denounce the publication as a “Fakesmile”. In this case, the artwork is created through total vandalism of a published volume of books that were commercially purchased for the occasion of its own destruction.

Related in connotation to the act of vandalism is the concept of desecration, an act in which a sacred object or image is treated with violent disrespect or violation. Taussig reframes this stigma however, proclaiming that “Desecration [is] the closest many of us are going to get to the sacred in this modern world.”³ Illustrated here, in the work of **Betty Tompkins** and **Leigh Ledare**, we are posed with examples in which the artist has defaced one of the most sacred of figures, the mother. In *Judy*, Ledare invited children (young enough to be supposedly innocent to the licentious presentation of the full-frontal female nude, thereby oblivious to the sexualize nature of the object) to scribble over a representation of the artist’s own mother. [No.14] **Tompkins** has torn a reproduction of Raphael’s *Virgin Mary*, the most famous of all mothers, from an art history book and has obscured the figure of the female with words compiled from a collection of subjective testimonies retrieved by Tompkins from thousands of female colleagues around the world. [No.13]

In another work from this series, **Tompkins** again conceals the figure of the woman, in this case a reproduction of the *Venus Rokeby*, as painted by Diego Velázquez in 1647 --and perhaps more

³ Taussig, Michael. “Defacement”. Stanford University Press, 1999.

infamously-- as defaced by the suffragette Mary Richardson in 1914. Both Tompkins and Richardson sought feminist activism in their defacement, Richardson by means of a meat chopper, and Tompkins by means of another tool, the paintbrush. [No.1]

In other instances, figures are cut off or obscured, or even the artwork itself is defaced. **Richard Aldrich** has often acted to define and reexamine the definition of painting and specifically what happens when the act of painting is turned on its head, attacked, or *détourned*. *Untitled*, demonstrates the negation of paint by more paint, relating to Piero Manzoni's concept of *Achrome*, in creating a composition devoid of any sign that might imply a meaning. As stated by Guy Debord, "Titles themselves, as we have already seen, are a basic element of *détournement*."⁴ This statement is self-reflexive when considering the full title of Aldrich's painting in this exhibition: *Untitled (Mirror)*. [No.10]

Accompanying this painting is *The Electric Space Between Sonny and Linda Sharrock*, a photocopy of a photograph, implying decapitation of two figures, where Aldrich has intentionally framed and defaced the figures of the supposed Sharrocks, rendering them anonymous. [No.20]

In some cases, the defacement isn't completed by the artists themselves, but simply entrusts bureaucratic structures to censor items of presumed profanity, as is the case in **Maria Eichhorn's** *Prohibited Imports*. In 2003, Eichhorn mailed to her gallery in Japan a selection of monographs by artists including Robert Mapplethorpe, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Jeff Koons, anticipating that they might be judged as pornographic and thus reviewed by censorship officers. Indeed, the books were seized at the Narita airport and the profane elements (such as genitalia) were defaced with sandpaper, rubbed down to the raw whiteness of the paper. First exhibited in Japan as books, the project is re-presented in this exhibition as a photograph. [No.4]

The poet **Susan Howe** effectively defaces the English alphabet by slicing and splicing words from articles, poems, essays and captions, among other sources. Presented here is two pages from the suite *Tom Tit Tot*. Within the diptych appears the words *Fnu Lnu*, an obscure legal term which acts as a stand-in for a plaintiff or defendant whose identity is unknown. An individual identifying as *Fnu Lnu* is effectively defaced, and the legal system is put to a challenge in acknowledging a public secret and playing along in a system where the identity must be known, but for one reason or another, cannot easily be articulated. In the words of Taussig, they are knowing what not to know, which is the most powerful form of knowledge. [No.11, 12]

Nicolás Guagnini collects faces who identities have succumbed to history, rearranging their features to create a sort of Exquisite Corpse, alluding to the cacophony of historical record and inconsistencies in documentation. The red ink alludes to the violent maintenance of civilizations and societal powers to assert their preferred versions of historical truth, endlessly insistent on cementing one version of historical fact without recourse to interpretation or revision. [No.3] This work, *Incest Aggregator*, itself is defaced by the work of an emerging artist, **Brook Hsu**. Possessed by the image of Japanese supermodel Devon Aoki, Hsu endlessly interprets new

⁴ Debord, Guy and Gil J. Wolman. "A User's Guide to *Détournement*", 1956.

readings of the face. Hsu is of course not defacing Aoki in the public sense of shame, however using the model's face, which has freely been given to the camera's gaze, as a sort of template in which to imbue new meaning, almost as if Aoki is defaced simply through repetition. This could be interpreted by way of the proverb, "Familiarity breeds contempt," or rather we could focus on the additive, enhancing aspect of defacement. [No.2]

In the 1960s (during a period concurrent with the late activities of the Situationists), Pop Art — notably the use of repetition of silkscreens in the work of **Andy Warhol**— negated the artistic covenant of technique, but even more prominent is the use of repetition to negate the concept of preciousness. Spoiling that which is precious lies at the core of *Defacement*. [No.4]

Lucas Ajemian subverts the concept of authorship and relative value in his ongoing body of work, *Laundered Paintings*. The artist acquires 'finished' paintings (which are willingly donated, a contract between Ajemian and the painter remains silently collaborative), and proceeds to un-stretch, soak, wash and dry the canvas, effectively laundering the original article. Ajemian further intervenes by cutting, reframing, and re-stretching the newly-washed canvas to create a new artwork, a painting which supersedes the original authorship and becomes a work by Ajemian himself, consequently removing the name of the original painter, and highlighting the relations of value and transaction in art and collaboration. Some of Ajemian's collaborators include market-starlets like Dana Schutz, Nate Lowman, and Cheyney Thompson, among others. The laundering process effectively reduces the value of the work by two, even three digits, while still creating value for a lesser-known conceptual artist like Ajemian. [No.21] In Michael Taussig's terming of defacement, this act --as well as in Andy Warhol's silkscreens-- "exerts its curious property of magnifying, not destroying, value."

Finally, there are two artists who deface creations of their own. Since the 1980s, the painter **Gerhard Richter** has been taking the standard format, commercially processed 4x6" photographs and obscuring the image by using the palette knife to smearing leftover oil paint across the surface. [No.14, 16, 18] This act of defacement is additive, as opposed to the scratched polaroid prints by **RH Quaytman**, which are reductive. Both however conjure the imagery of an incisive attack, using a device such as a knife to deface. Quaytman here is also the primary photographer, in these examples taking portraits of friends such as artist Matt Mullican and curator and critic Ed Halter. [No.15, 17]

Both artists are using consumer-use photography formats, images that are meant to end in family photo albums. These seemingly aggressive acts of defacement, though paint smears and scratched emulsion, could perhaps be gestures that represent a certain sort of affectionate attention to the original subject of the photograph, through which only the artist is intimately connected. The viewer struggles to uncover meaning or a narrative from underlying photograph, bringing closer attention in fact to the seemingly banal moment which is captured on film: a bench by a window, a man checking his email, men and women walking down flights of stairs, visiting an exhibition, etc.

The act of defacement after all can be enlightening. To end with the words of Taussig, “It brings insides outside, unearthing knowledge, and revealing mystery...it may also animate the thing defaced, and the mystery revealed may become more mysterious.”⁵

⁵ Taussig, Michael. “Defacement”. Stanford University Press, 1999.