Introduction: Vandalism

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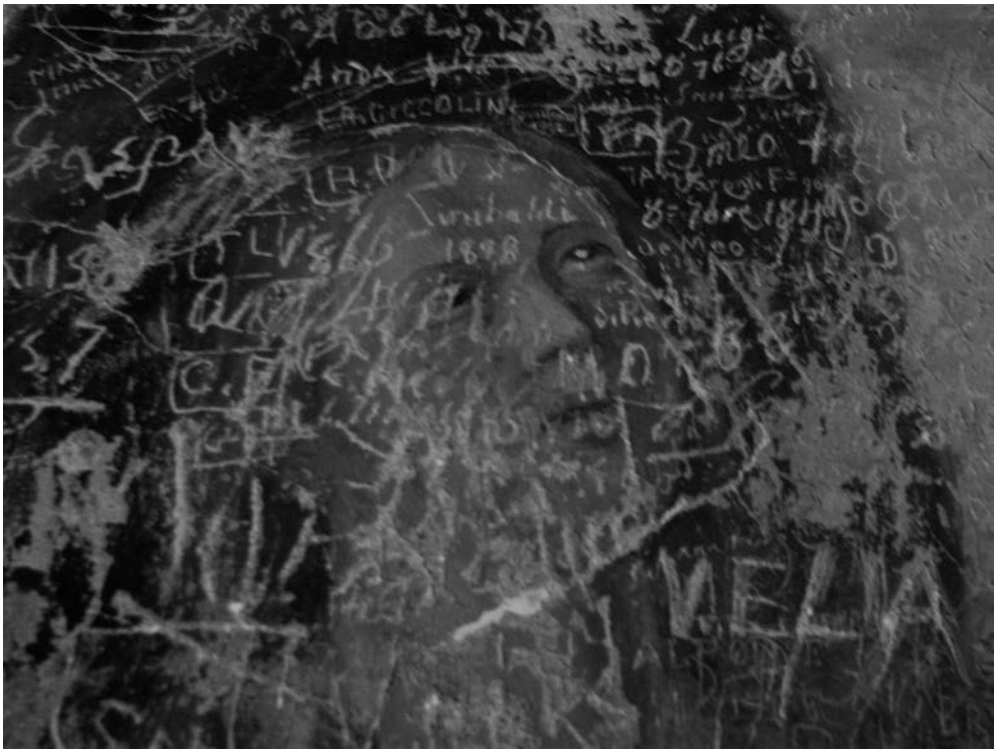

INTRODUCTION: VANDALISM

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Figure 1. Detail of graffiti on the mural of the Virgin Mary (1160), Monastery of St. Benedict. Subiaco, Italy, 2009 (Photo by Rosa Lowinger)

Some people become cops because they want to make the world a better place. Some people become vandals because they want to make the world a better looking place.

—Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (2007)

July, 2014: The world watches in horror as once again a jihadist group—in this case, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/Syria, known alternatively as ISIS or ISIL—wages the latest version of ideologically driven cultural vandalism against the region's monuments and historic sites. Though clearly not as shocking as the acts of murder and torture the self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate is inflicting on the residents of the region at the time of this writing, the annihilation of those centuries-old monuments characterizes vandalism in its most extreme and ugly form. The list of sites includes not only dozens of churches, but also venerated Islamic sites such as the seventh-century Imam Yahya Abul Qasim Mosque, the thirteenth-century Mashad Yahya Abul Kassem Mosque, the eighth-century Mosque of the Prophet Yunnus (considered the burial place of the Old Testament Jonah), and landscape-defining statues of the Abbasid poet Abu Tammam (788–845) and the Iraqi musician and poet Osman al-Mawsali (1854–1923). Yet this particular brand of cultural barbarism also underscores the symbolic power of heritage itself. After all, why go to the trouble of bombing synagogues and burning Jewish books, as the Nazis did in World War II, or leveling Cambodia's Buddhist Temples and libraries, as the Khmer Rouge did during its atrocious 1975 "Return to Year Zero" campaign, for any reason other than to "deeply and irreversibly alter" the identity of a people by means of "brutal and intensive cultural mutilation"?[1] The vandalism of an artwork, monument, or site is therefore also a perverted form of veneration. Art that is damaged or destroyed is art that is valuable. This holds true whether the act in question is perpetrated by a Nazi, a criminal, or a psychotic.

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines vandalism as both "an action involving deliberate destruction of or damage to public or private property," and as "a deliberate, unauthorized act that is intentional and done in order to alter, make a mark in, or purposely damage art, architecture, or public places." As this issue of *Change Over Time* will demonstrate, the history of art and architecture is intricately enmeshed with both of these

definitions. Vandalism's range of activities and intentions—though traditionally associated with harmful or misguided impulses, aggressive or deranged perpetrators, and results whose effect on built heritage is nearly always unwanted—sometimes augments our knowledge and consideration of heritage's intrinsic value. By ravaging the monuments of the vanquished and demolishing the sculptures that they consider blasphemous, conquering armies and iconoclasts of all persuasions draw attention to those very works. Artworks as different as Michelangelo's fifteenth-century *Pieta*, Barnett Newman's 1967 *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue*, and Diego Velasquez's seventeenth-century *Rokeby Venus* (which was slashed by British suffragettes in 1914) are highlighted in art history because of, and not in spite of, their smashing and slashing. More benignly, the centuries-old scratches made by pilgrims on the 1160 mural of the Virgin Mary at the Subiaco Monastery in Italy is part greeting and part devotional in character. The same holds true for the graffiti that covers the Paris tomb of Jim Morrison.

As preservationists, we tend to eschew unauthorized interventions to art and monuments. Indeed, more than one peer reviewer for this issue expressed an unconditional disdain for graffiti. Yet the changes perpetrated by vandalism, and especially graffiti, are as old as art itself; such interventions often lend a layer of meaning that would otherwise not exist. For example, no one would argue that what we know about the ancient world is augmented by the graffiti on the walls of Pompeii and Herculaneum, or the Alexamanos graffito, a first-century CE doodle from the Palatine Hill, known to be the earliest extant image of Christ on the Cross, in which a scratched figure of a soldier derides another soldier as he bows to an image of a crucified donkey. As preservationists, we recognize the informational and historical value of the aforementioned markings. The pejorative content of the Alexamanos graffito, for example—a hallmark of the unauthorized wall text that will continue into the age of the spray can—reveals more about Roman attitudes toward early Christians than many pages of text. In some cases, such as the penciled graffiti on the buildings of the Japanese-American internment camp at Tulelake, California, the graffiti becomes a form of heritage that supersedes the value of the building on which it is written. But how do we assign value to such markings? At what point do they go from being a scourge on heritage to becoming heritage? At Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris, the caretakers of the tomb of Jim Morrison remove graffiti frequently enough to erode the stone. In Havana, Cuba, the government pointedly and regularly restores a graffito near the university that reads "°Abajo Batista!" ("Down with Batista!"), a reference to the pre-Castro dictatorship that the current government vanquished. Yet, one would be hard pressed to find a single preservation professional who would advocate for removing or reducing the graffiti at Pompeii, or filling and in-painting the centuries-old gouges of devotees visiting the tomb of St. Benedict at Subiaco, Italy.

This past year has seen several major museum exhibits that explore vandalism's contribution to the meaning of cultural heritage. At the Tate Britain, the exhibit *Art under Attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm* (which ran from October 2, 2013, to January 5, 2014) highlighted both the history of physical attacks against art and monuments in the United Kingdom and the range of religious, political, and aesthetic motivations for those assaults.

The exhibition's intent, as co-curator Tabitha Barber stated, was to examine what "compels people to carry out attacks on art and whether these motives have changed over the course of five hundred years."[2] The exhibit's final room was devoted to contemporary art practice that employs vandalism as a formal tool of art-making. This last notion was the starting point for the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's *Damage Control: Art and Destruction Since 1950*. This exhibit, which ran from October 2013 to May 2014, offered a fairly thorough overview of the numerous ways in which contemporary visual artists used destruction as both cultural content and artistic practice, in response to what the curator of the exhibit refers to as the "destructive forces in a world close to the apocalypse."[3] In other words, the cataclysmic events of the postwar era, including Hiroshima, the arms race, the Cold War, and World War II itself, fomented a need for transforming destructive tendencies into acts of creation. It is our hope that the current issue of *Change Over Time* will serve a similar purpose in the face of the horrendous political events that are plaguing our world at this time.

References

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