

Destruction as Revolutionary Force

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Destruction as Revolutionary Force

MARINA BARSY JANER

Destruction mediates and withholds the possibility of transformation. As a medium for change, it inevitably provides, produces and is produced by the alteration or disruption of a certain reality at the material level. This physical change, however, may directly imply a rearrangement in the socio-political and relational reality of a collective or an individual by providing a new societal structure that exists only through the destruction of the previous one. Even if the produced destruction is partial or time-limited, this crack in the established order of reality is fundamentally revolutionary as it presents the possibility of an instance of transformation in existing social structures (from everyday human relations to state/market control).

Contemporary artists have worked through the concept of destruction employing it as a medium to dismantle the established order, thus redesigning relations of power and affect. Where the state's power or performance has used destruction for its machinery of control, artists have used various techniques of counter-destruction. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o speaks of enactments of power in the struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the state's performance of power: "The state has its areas of performance; so has the artist. While the state performs power, the power of the artist is solely in

the performance."¹ Contemporary artists have used the possibility of destruction as a means for social and/or individual change, with the aim of questioning and reshaping the relations involved.

In 2014, Chilean visual artist Francisco Papas Fritas (Francisco Tapia Salinas) presented *Ad Augusta per Angusta* at the Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral in Santiago. His installation consisted of a white van (*combi*) that showcased plastic containers filled with the ashes of the burned debt documents of the Universidad del Mar students throughout Chile (of over 500 million dollars). The van had the logo of the Universidad del Mar and many other references to it, including the title of the work, taken from the University's slogan. The ashes of the burned student debt were exhibited together with other objects related to the action, including a legal document that presented Papas Fritas' self-accusation for burning the documents. The rear of the van was reserved for screening a video of the artist, describing the creation and aims of the work as "more than a performance piece. The project itself is about eliminating the debtor."² During the opening of the exhibition, this video was published simultaneously on the Internet and Papas Fritas went into hiding. From his clandestine whereabouts the artist continued to publish communiqués on social media.



Francisco Papas Fritas, *Ad Augusta per Angusta*, 2014.
Courtesy of the artist.

Papas Fritas took the payment documents from the Universidad del Mar's central headquarters in Reñaca—a site the students have occupied since December 28, 2012. He testifies that after joining the occupation for two months, he removed the promissory notes, letters of credit and other debt documentation from the main university building and burned them ritualistically one by one. The veracity of the testimony and real source of the materiality (the documents) become part of the performance itself and its viral effect. This spectacle of destruction affected and called upon students from around the nation.

For the artist, *Ad Augusta per Angusta* is a collective work that the Chilean student movement produced against the commercialization of education, along with national mobilizations occurring since 2011. "This artwork now belongs to you" claims the video in the exhibit that shows Papas Fritas in the foreground directly addressing the viewer: the students and the people of Chile. In this video-format, he plays with the imagery of becoming the terrorist of a Chilean state that supports a profit-oriented education system. The material transmutation proposed in this artwork removes all the previous legal power these papers had over the lives of many. The education

market's machinery of control over its consumers (the students) crumbles as the materiality of the promissory notes disintegrates. The student is given the possibility of being released from her or his debtor position. By mutating from paper to ash, the commercial agreement of education is transformed into a human right. The transmutation or destruction of the material involves the transference of power.

The essence of the ashes functions as an element bound to memory that leads directly to the material's past existence. Burning books, codices, paintings and people has been a continuous practice throughout history and has been used to perpetuate a specific way of thinking and doing in a society, eliminating anything outside the established norm. *Ad Augusta per Angusta* overturns this logic; these ashes become the liberation of the oppressed. The act of burning is the act of destroying a neoliberal system of market-oriented priorities. Beyond the artwork's objective of liberating the students from their debts with the Universidad del Mar and expressing social criticism of Chile's elitist education system, the artist/activist's proposal ultimately resides in destroying the subjugated position and with it the capitalist system's hierarchical machinery of exclusion and segregation.

Francisco Papas Fritas, *Ad Augusta per Angusta*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.





Andrea Zittlau, *The Heart Project*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Emiliano Leonardi.



Andrea Zittlau, *The Heart Project*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Adam Cooper Terán.

The everyday experience in capitalist society generates and sustains a separatist logic between individuals in which the economy and consumerism mediate exchange. Some art projects create a rupture in these contemporary forms of social relations. German artist Andrea Zittlau trades the heart, a heart, “her” heart. In *The Heart Project* (part of *The Body Series*, 2015–ongoing) a red anatomical heart is used as barter. This human-size heart is a sculpture made of soap, having an intense rose fragrance. In exchange for the heart, something of equal value is required. Each person decides what to give in order to obtain Zittlau’s heart. The possible trade may include, sharing a private memory or story, an object with a meaningful emotional value for the person or even a kiss. The artist explains that each time she performed the trade, it felt like she was really trading her own heart.³ It is both a material and immaterial trade. In this sense, letting go of her heart is an act of vulnerability. Communicating through the object of the heart becomes an exchange of complicities and sensibilities, providing a tangible and intangible experience.

As a material, soap involves the idea of cleaning and purifying. This cleansing implies the eventual vanishing of the heart. The soap heart changes its form with every use and will eventually disappear. The heart as materiality is thus also vulnerable to change. This is the price of its use. Here, there is also an exchange of matter as the soap touches the skin of its user and through mutual contact both skin/body and soap/heart are consumed in affective erosion. The heart’s symbolic value relates to human sensibility, love and affection. For Zittlau the heart of soap reflects consumption and time, both features of disappearance that relate to human relationships and the human body.

The material chosen to be the vehicle of exchange is a vanishing substance that requires physical contact in order to cleanse. This heart contains the possibility of its destruction through its material consumption. Furthermore, it also represents the trade and the interaction/relationship it required. This work implies that in each encounter human sensibility is transformed. The heart’s trade and consumption rethinks market values, moving beyond a capitalist logic. *The Heart Project* reclaims the immaterial sphere in the overall value of exchange as a critic of capitalist values based on a material economy. The immaterial value of human sensibility remains after the materiality of the soap heart disappears. The possibility of material disappearance and destruction serves to emphasize human value over the commercialization of all relations.

Physical destruction enables the autonomy of change to occur beyond the material and into the social fabric. Contemporary artists working with the erosion, consumption, transmutation or disappearance of materials evoke a transformation of societal and affective immaterial structures. The nature of the artworks discussed lies in the social and relational implications produced through the possibility of destruction. *Ad Augusta per Augusta* uses destruction to literally provoke the bank and state apparatus, attempting to destroy class oppression through tangibly burning the student debt. *The Heart Project* looks at capitalist values and moves beyond the material (exchange, use and dissolution) to the immaterial affective values in each interaction that the trade of a consumable heart produced. The intention of both these artworks is to reshape capitalism’s imposed relations. In the first case, the commercial

design of the education system and in the latter, the capitalist exchange filtered through all human relations. The potential of destruction provides emancipation of state–market oppression and the restructuring of new (or lost) affectivities. The deconstruction of capitalist reality becomes an urgent demand together with the re–existence of other forms of relationality. Using destruction as a medium for change, artists evoke systemic and relational transformations.

1. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, “Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space”, *Drama Review*, vol. 41, no. 3 (1997): 12.

2. Francisco Papas Fritas. *Ad Augusta per Augusta*. 2014. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUJmKt8VrpU>.

3. Personal correspondence with Andrea Zittlau. January 8, 2019.

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