

Bang! Kaboom! Art!

‘Damage Control,’ at the Hirshhorn, Explores Neglected Trend

By BLAKE GOPNIK

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WASHINGTON — The rubble from a “concert” in which a piano gets smashed; a sculpture that slowly pushes apart its gallery; a drawing by a modern master completely erased by a rival — all are masterworks from a neglected trend in which artists have been more into breaking than making. “Damage Control: Art and Destruction Since 1950,” a show that opens on Thursday at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum here, is built around such harm-full works.

“The possibilities for destruction in the world itself — whether from atomic bombs, from the Holocaust, from the environment or from our own warped psychology — are so great, and so powerful, that, particularly in this postwar period, there was a feeling that the artist had to go beyond just making a painting, or just making a sculpture that didn’t move, but something that almost fought fire with fire,” Kerry Brougher, the Hirshhorn’s interim director, said during a telephone interview that also included Russell Ferguson, a professor of art at the University of California, Los Angeles. They are both curators of the show.

Mr. Ferguson said that for the artists in the show, “there’s an element of attraction to a completely, almost anarchic destructive impulse, yet at the same time, they want to get on top of that, get control of it.”

On the exhibition’s opening weekend, Raphael Montañez Ortiz, who was born in Brooklyn in 1934, will be reprising his 1966 “Piano Destruction Concert,” in which he takes an ax to its titular instrument. “We are all natural Nazis, fascists, murderers, full of repressions and hate,” Mr. Ortiz declared in 1968. “Instead of pouring out our natural aggressions on people, we should use them in an artistic framework.”

Mr. Ortiz’s original performance was part of a monthlong Destruction in Art Symposium that was organized in part by Gustav Metzger, the inventor of “auto-destructive” art. In 1961, Mr. Metzger had donned protective gear, picked up a spray-gun of hydrochloric acid, then dissolved three giant canvases that he had stretched — so that his “paintings” ended up no longer existing at all. (Pete

Townshend of the Who was an art-school student of Mr. Metzger's, and credits him with inspiring his [guitar smashing](#).)

"I asked Metzger if he could do an acid painting here, but he said that he can no longer physically do it," Mr. Brougher added.

Speaking by phone from outside Cambridge, England, the 87-year-old Mr. Metzger explained that his art has its roots in the horrors that Jews and others faced under the Nazis, and in his own flight from Germany to England in 1939. "Pessimism is at the core of the theory of auto-destructive art," he said, in an English with German cadences.

"The world and its fears and its dangers," he added, "it is everyday within me, at the core of my being." Al Masino, who is in charge of installation at the Hirshhorn, said that "[Damage Control](#)" has been challenging at every level of the health-and-safety bureaucracy. Chris Burden's gallery-destroying sculpture, titled "[Samson](#)," was made in 1985 and consists of a turnstile that bars the entrance to any exhibition that shows it. As each visitor passes through, massive gears are set in motion that push two beams out, with some force, against the gallery walls. In theory at least, if a show with "Samson" in it proves to be a big blockbuster, its walls could come tumbling down.

Mr. Brougher pointed out that "Samson" has come to address the obsession that today's museum boards have with attendance numbers. "But in this case," Mr. Brougher said, "success could also bring the museum down."

Mr. Masino said that just finding a way for those beams to stay perched overhead was an engineering nightmare. (Then the work got held up at customs near its home in Brazil, and has not made the trip to Washington.)

Another work intended for "Damage Control" was made by the Los Angeles artist Liz Larner in 1987 and is a two-foot-square block of hazardous substances. Its list of materials includes saltpeter (an ingredient in gunpowder), ammonium nitrate (used in the Oklahoma City bombing) and TNT itself.

"We went through quite a lot of effort to get it," Mr. Ferguson said, but in the end there was no way to convince shippers to take it. (The work is illustrated in the catalog instead.) Even the more standard objects in the exhibition present a destructive, even anti-art attitude that goes against a museum's instinct to preserve and protect. Consider Robert Rauschenberg's "Erased de Kooning Drawing," from 1953, or Harold Eugene Edgerton's footage of nuclear explosions, a kind of self-portrait of "Death, the destroyer of worlds," in the phrase attributed to Robert Oppenheimer. There's a painting by Ed Ruscha that imagines the Los Angeles County Museum of Art being lost in a raging inferno. This is a work of art, you could say, imagining its own fiery death. Will there be some people who might take the wrong kind of inspiration from this?

“A bunch of 15-, 16-year-old kids, who are already excited when they get here — this show could put them over the edge,” Mr. Masino said. A huge color photo by Jeff Wall from 1978, “The Destroyed Room,” gives an image of what many suburban teenagers still dream of doing to their parents’ tidy home.

“Damage Control” includes a video by Roy Arden that documents the riots that raged in 1994 after Vancouver’s hockey team lost the Stanley Cup. Mr. Ferguson pointed out that, in the reliably left-wing art world, images of people who take to the streets are often read “as heroic rebels confronting the state — we think of the Egyptian Spring or Paris in ’68.”

But as viewers watch Mr. Arden’s video, Mr. Ferguson said, “it becomes clearer and clearer that these people have no political agenda at all.” As people take it in, he added, “we have to ask: What’s our relationship to this kind of spectacular — and in this case completely unmotivated — violence?”

One could also ask whether, deep down, the art of destruction caters to a cultural taste for such havoc. Mr. Brougher said that museum officials gave thought to such issues, and that staff members would be extra alert for audience misbehavior. But Mr. Ferguson said that for the artists in the show, “it’s not just ‘Smash everything up and it’s done.’ ”

“It’s a matter of using that attraction to the destructive impulse to get to a place where they have actually made something,” he said.

He recalled how even Picasso, seen as one of the greatest creators, once said, “With me, a picture is a sum of destructions.” To create anything new, Mr. Ferguson said, “you’re constantly having to clear everything else out of the way, and that can involve a profoundly destructive element.”

“Damage Control: Art and Destruction Since 1950,” opens on Thursday and runs through May 26 at the Hirshhorn Museum, on the National Mall, Washington; (202) 633-1000, hirshhorn.si.edu.

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