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Article

On the Value of Vandalism: An Appraisal of Art and the Politics of Defacement

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Abstract

Monuments of culture and history have been either catalysts or casualties of war and crises; they are often vandalised as reactionary acts of protest against dominant powers and oppressive states and history. This reality, juxtaposed with the ongoing vandalism of monuments during global crises, prompts the following questions: Why do cultural monuments bear the brunt of vandals and protesters? What drives vandalism? Is there any value in vandalism? This article explores the tensions between art and vandalism, focusing on elucidating any potential value in the act of destruction. I begin by presenting various theoretical perspectives on art and vandalism to provide a multidimensional view of the act. Next, I delve into the drivers of vandalism, examining the motivations and psychology behind these actions. Finally, I discuss the concept of value in the context of art and vandalism. While vandalism has traditionally been viewed in a negative light, I conclude that it possesses intrinsic value, particularly in how artists have conceptually explored the aesthetics of destruction in their creative processes and in the impact of vandalism on sociopolitical structures of communication.

Keywords: art and vandalism; art defacement; art, society, and vandalism; value of vandalism; vandalism of art

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Introduction

At the centre of the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall Campaign at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, was the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. The campaign resulted in the removal of the Rhodes statue (Marschall 2017). This event was the spark that ignited the fire for a concerted protest across South Africa and other African and Western nations for the removal of statues with contested histories—mostly those linked with the history of slavery, genocide, or colonialism. The defacement of art has a long-standing place in the art world's history. Thousands of artworks were destroyed during the Byzantine iconoclastic period and several sacred art pieces were defaced during the Reformation (Bessette 2016).

Monuments of culture and history have been either catalysts or casualties of war and crises; they are often vandalised as reactionary acts of protest against dominant powers and oppressive states and history. This iconoclastic notion has featured significantly in a spate of global crises since the COVID-19 pandemic. There are several media reports about the vandalisation and use of art as protest during crises and sociopolitical uprisings such as the Black Lives Matter movement (Hadley et al. 2022), the pro-Palestine protests (Harris 2024), and the protests against Russia's occupation of Ukraine (Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security 2023).

The use of the term "vandalism" in this article is limited to its relevance to art and cultural and historical monuments. Thus, vandalism is seen as nonverbal communication of disagreement and disapproval through the symbolic and violent mutilation of icons as representations of the vandals' grievances. Also, vandalism can simply be an act of destruction for the sake of destruction. It is important to point this out, to clarify that not all acts of vandalism are a symbolic communication of disagreement. Both Marschall (2017) and Merrills (2016) trace the origin of the notion of vandalism to the aftermath of the French Revolution in the eighteenth century; an era significantly marked by violence, according to Bresnahan (2018). *Vandalisme*, as it was originally coined, was the standard word used to describe systemic revolutionary violence as well as "any act of cultural desecration, particularly against art and architecture" (Merrills 2016, 156).

Vorobyeva et al. (2015) highlight a global increase in vandal behaviours which has resulted in significant financial losses and damage to public and private properties and monuments. This reality, juxtaposed with ongoing vandalism of monuments during global crises, prompts the following questions: Why do cultural monuments bear the brunt of vandals and protesters? What drives vandalism? Is there any value in vandalism? This article explores the tensions and complexities between art and vandalism, focusing on elucidating any potential value in the act of destruction. I argue that vandalism, rather than necessarily being an illegitimate and repugnant act, can be justified as a valuable form of social speech. More importantly, I propose that in considering the value of vandalism, the restrictive approach of "white or black," "good

or bad," or "right or wrong" should be discouraged because the context in which the act occurs plays a crucial role in shaping its perception and value.

In the following section, I present various theoretical perspectives on art and vandalism to provide a multidimensional view of the act. Next, I delve into the drivers of vandalism, examining the motivations and psychology behind these actions. Finally, I discuss the concept of value in the context of art and vandalism. I conclude that vandalism can in fact be valuable in terms of its moral, prudential, economic, and aesthetic relevance to society.

Perspectives on Art and Vandalism

Bhati and Pearce (2016) view vandalism as a contextually influenced interaction between people and their environment. Similarly, Qwatekana et al. (2021) link vandalism to urbanisation. While both perspectives highlight the importance of context in understanding vandalism, Qwatekana et al.'s focus on the urban context is debatable. Although many forms of graffiti can be classified as urban vandalism (Roos 1992), not all art destruction is purely a result of urbanisation. In Africa, the history of cultural vandalism dates back to colonial incursions, which led to significant theft, destruction, and derogation of African art and cultural heritage. During this period, African traditional art was often destroyed or recontextualised by colonial powers, marking a pivotal shift in the relevance of African art to its people (Kasfir 2007).

Vandalism frequently underscores the importance and significance of material objects to societies. These materials are often acquired to symbolise achieved status or commemorate significant historical milestones. Conversely, these same objects may be targeted and vandalised to express anger and disapproval towards the individual or entity associated with them. Roos (1992, 75) explains:

> Vandalism occurs when symbols of power and values of authority are destroyed or sullied in a conspicuous act of negative honour in the context of cultural profanation. … Actions of this type are related to the social importance of a symbolic value to the perpetrator.

The tainted image of a perpetrator's statue in public spaces often draws negative reactions. Lim (2020) refers to such an image as "problematic commemoration"—not everyone agrees that the memory of the commemorated deserves to be exalted in public, hence the vandalism. Lai (2020, 3–4) provides two explanations for a tainted monument: it either degrades or alienates. A monument degrades by expressing an ideology that is disrespectful and linked to an unjust social hierarchy. It alienates when it undermines the idea of equal moral standing for all. For example, the image of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town led Chumani Maxwell to demand its removal, prompting the displacement of similar monuments in South Africa in 2015 (Marschall 2017). Similarly, the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, driven by America's history of slavery and colonialism, saw the toppling of monuments symbolising racial

injustice, including the defacement of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's statue in Richmond, Virginia, with anti-racist graffiti and the names of black people killed in police custody (Hadley et al. 2022, 2).

Williams (2008) contrasts the non-legal approach of scholars to art vandalism by advocating for stricter laws to control vandalism and mitigate its financial and cultural losses. Although various countries, including South Africa, have laws condemning and criminalising vandalism, their legitimacy is often contested. Some argue that certain acts of vandalism are justified as expressions of political dissatisfaction through the destruction of symbolic public structures and monuments (Marschall 2017; Qwatekana et al. 2021).

Roos (1992) argues that situational and motivational explanations fail to fully unravel the true motivations behind vandalism and the psychology of vandals. Instead, Roos views vandalism as a symbolic act, suggesting that it should be seen as a demonstration of dissatisfaction with societal (dis)integration. In this context, violent outbursts are better understood as reactions to mistreatment or social imbalance rather than random acts of defiance. Roos (1992) classifies vandalism into three categories: acts of excellence (rational and helpful destructive acts such as the demolition of a building with a compromised structural integrity[1]); acts of neutralisation and release (motiveless vandalism for its own sake); and acts of obligation (activism and social justice). This classification helps explain various forms of art vandalism. For instance, those who see vandalism as a justified symbolic act align with the third category. Some scholars describe vandalism as "destructive joy," where the focus is on the reaction and psychological pain inflicted on the enemy rather than the object itself (Marschall 2017). Aligned with Roos's second category, Pfattheicher et al. (2019) link vandalism for pleasure to sadism, which is the enjoyment of dominance and power over others. In this view, vandals derive satisfaction from the power they exert over the vandalised and the enjoyment of the destruction process.

Roos (1992) suggests that vandalism is primarily committed by adults, with juvenile vandalism being relatively low in crime statistics. This view may reflect the early 1990s context of the report. However, today's society is more complex, and juveniles are increasingly aware of their social and political rights, leading to a significant rise in their participation in vandalism. For instance, exemplifying what Roos calls "acts of obligation," teenagers are actively involved in the Just Stop Oil campaign,[2] protesting the government's approval of fossil fuel usage (Petras and Borresen 2022). While

1 Aitken (2019) presents an overview of historic structural failures and their implications for human lives. Such failures often necessitate demolition which Roos sees as vandalism as an act of excellence.

2 Motivated by the need to preserve the environment, different acts of vandalism are perpetrated as a symbolic protest against dominant powers and devastating capitalist agendas. These can be seen as an example of Roos's recognition of vandalism as "acts of obligation." See Aloi (2024).

vandalism is not exclusive to adolescents, traits of vandalism often begin to emerge at this age owing to distortions in social interactions (Vorobyeva et al. 2015).

A study on the psychological origins of vandalism established that disturbances in the parent-child relationship can increase a child's tendency towards vandalism (Vorobyeva et al. 2015). Kruzhkova et al. (2018) also investigated this phenomenon, focusing on how the parent-child relationship and family upbringing styles influence a child's proclivity for vandalism. A key finding was that family violence significantly increases an adolescent's tendency toward vandalism. Maternal influence was found to be more impactful on the child's destructive behaviour than paternal influence. However, a non-interfering paternal parenting style can also contribute to vandalism tendencies. The study recommends preventing family violence and providing proper parenting education. While studies such as the aforementioned have their merits, a rethink of the basic assumption that motivated the study is necessary. Vandalism is considered in these studies as the outcome of a pathology, an act of violence and destruction without a productive role.

The scholarly discourse on vandalism is divided into those who are vehemently against it and those who see it as a necessary and justified response. Scholars such as Salomon (2018) condemn vandalism for its destructive tendencies, arguing that it undermines social order and respect for property. On the other hand, proponents of vandalism, often aligned with decolonial perspectives, argue that it is a form of necessary intervention. They view vandalism as an act of iconoclasm, essential for the decolonisation of public spaces and the dismantling of oppressive symbols.

The Drivers of Vandalism

From the spray-painting of "Kill Lies All" on Picasso's *Guernica* to the defacement of a Virgin Mary portrait by a devout Catholic in 1999, Williams (2008) details various acts of violence and vandalism against art in museums since the 1970s. These acts aim to attack not only the objects but also the public's sensibility and the history they represent. Intentionality and responsibility are key considerations in vandalism (Bhati and Pearce 2016). Qwatekana et al. (2021, 188) define vandalism as "an act of intended and deliberate human aggression resulting in damage or loss of property." A major driver of art defacement is deliberate human intention. Most visitors to galleries or museums are aware of the status and value of the works. Thus, deciding to vandalise becomes a calculated act to gain attention and visibility (Bessette 2016). Beyond personal motives, political conflicts, legends of ancient treasures, and hopes of discovering cultural and mythological fortune also drive looting and artefact vandalism (Vella et al. 2015).

Historically, vandalism has been seen as a solution when freedom and livelihood are at risk (Roos 1992). It sometimes serves as a revolt against capitalist exploitation, with workers smashing machines and equipment symbolising their oppression. Roos (1992,

74) defines vandalism as "a type of 'nihilistic violence,' directed at material things representing a superior order or an authority of a developed culture." Conflicts between galleries, museum owners, and workers, driven by capitalist motivations, can lead to the vandalism of housed pieces. Bessette's (2016) study found that most acts of art vandalism are committed by individuals with a prior connection to the institution, such as patrons, artists, or guards. Mismanaged contractual relationships and power dynamics between gallery owners and struggling artists or employees often lead to such "nihilistic violence" as a form of protest.

Bhati and Pearce (2016) see vandalism as predominantly a deviant behaviour which is motivated by micro and macro factors. On the micro level, vandalism is motivated by biological, developmental, and psychological factors. The macro factors that influence vandalism are social, economic, and environmental. It is important to know that acts of vandalism are not only perpetrated by social delinquents; in some cases, they are perpetrated by tourists and disgruntled customers. Acts of tourist vandalism range from what they leave behind such as stains, writings, and engravings on monuments, to what they take away from the monuments as souvenirs. While acts of vandalism are mostly overt and physical, less overt versions of vandalism also exist, for example, not removing shoes before entering temples, refusing to wear hijabs in mosques, smoking in a hospital or an art gallery, and indiscriminately photographing people who do not want to be photographed (Bhati and Pearce 2016).

Unlike the nihilistic and capitalist motivations for attacking artworks, some acts of vandalism are ideologically driven. Marschall (2017, 205) defines ideological vandalism as the intentional "defacement of a symbolic object to communicate a political message," a view supported by Hadley et al. (2022) and Lim (2020). The Rhodes Must Fall campaign exemplifies this type of vandalism. Chumani Maxwell, a University of Cape Town student, initiated the movement by throwing human faeces at the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on 9 March 2015, protesting the university's colonial legacy. This act sparked a nationwide call to remove and replace colonial statues, seen as reminders of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past (Frank and Ristic 2020; Marschall 2017). These campaigns birthed a number of hashtags, such as #RhodesMustFall, #TakeItDown, and #RemoveConfederateStatutes (Decker 2024). Beyond Rhodes, there were demands by the "Fallists"[3] to remove Mahatma Gandhi's statue owing to his belief in Indian superiority over Africans (Qwatekana et al. 2021).

Most of the acts of vandalism of monuments in the recent and current global crises have also been driven by certain ideologies. Within the context of the 2018 protests in Nicaragua, Selejan (2021) supports the imperative of ideological vandalism as a

3 The spate of political protests and vandalism which started from the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) campaign birthed the term "Fallism," exploring questions around the place of contested monuments in the public space and the ethics of vandalism as a symbolic protest against such social injustice. This term emerged from the proponents of the RMF campaign who referred to themselves as "Fallists." See Frank and Ristic (2020).

symbolic political necessity. Selejan recognises the manifestation of acts of vandalism as symbolic reparative actions, necessary to articulate political demands. Selejan (2021, 35) thus emphasises that public monuments and icons "cannot be entirely 'stabilised,' turned into a fixed form, unless it is to become simply a vessel, invested with state symbolism, a means for its ongoing legitimisation." In this instance, symbolic vandalism is viewed as creative reconfiguration and rearticulation and not necessarily destruction.

Regardless of the potential for violence, Hadley et al. (2022) support the interaction between the public and public monuments, as long as this interaction is contained under the umbrella of an ideology. Thus, the authors believe that the defacement of monuments that happened during the Black Lives Matter movement could be excused since most of the defacements happened in public spaces. They therefore advocate for the democratisation of public spaces to encourage inclusivity and give room to the rights of individuals to acknowledge the past.

Lai (2020) argues that ideological and political vandalism can sometimes be permissible or obligatory. To Lai, when state-sponsored removal or recontextualisation of controversial monuments refuses to happen, such overt defacement of public monuments is sometimes the only form of response or counter-speech to tainted symbols of the contested and tense past of the people. In essence, if such monuments would be in the public glare regardless of the contested history they represent, then members of the public who disagree with the represented ideology and history have the right to reply. Sometimes, such a reply may require the defacement of the monument, in a somewhat aggressive or retaliatory protest.

Durdiyeva (2020) agrees with Lai (2020) in the latter's suggestion that political vandalism could be a welcome counter-speech should the authorities not take appropriate action to remove or recontextualise contested monuments. Vandalism became a prompt for the authorities in the case of the monument of Stalin, which formed the basis of Durdiyeva's (2020) article. The monument of Stalin which references the Soviet repression started attracting vandals almost as soon as it was erected—the first act came a day after it was installed. In a specific demonstration of the expectations and responsibilities of the state as expressed by both Lai and Durdiyeva, the local municipality of Surgut removed the monument of Stalin three weeks after its installation because it lacked state authorisation, in addition to its lack of "public toleration" (Durdiyeva 2020, 1). In line with Lai's explanation of a tainted monument, the Stalin monument was judged tainted by the municipality because it degraded and alienated the collective conscience of the people.

The state's decisions do not always reflect an ideology that considers the public's collective good. In 2023, the Kano State government in Northern Nigeria demolished a monument at the government house roundabout commemorating Kano's Golden

Jubilee.[4] The state justified this act of monumental vandalism by citing the presence of a cross-like motif, deemed inappropriate in predominantly Islamic Kano (Bukar 2023). This demolition raises several questions: Why destroy the entire monument instead of removing or recontextualising the symbol? Could this be a power struggle between the current and past administrations? Was the destruction a strategy to pre-empt protests against the Christian reference? While these questions are beyond this article's scope, it is clear that the Kano state government's rationale for demolishing the monument is merely an ideological excuse.

In October 1999, Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* was equally condemned by the state for being "anti-Catholic." Ofili deliberately incorporated elephant dung and offcuts from newspaper prints of the female genitalia in his unusual rendition of the Virgin Mary. During an exhibition of the mixed-media piece at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, denounced the painting for its blasphemous inclination. The mayor went as far as threatening to cut the state funding of the Brooklyn Museum of Art in which the "blasphemous" piece was exhibited. Later in the same year, 72-year-old Dennis Heiner, a Catholic man, vandalised the piece with white paint because it blasphemed his Catholic values (von Veh 2017).

It is imperative to clarify that the notion of ideological vandalism does not excuse the fact that some of the vandals have no personal stake or no knowledge of the history, implications, and underlying ideology behind the defacement of the monuments. Indeed, Marschall (2017) confirms that some vandals destroy merely for the joy and satisfaction derived from destruction. In this manner, a defacement that was ideologically motivated often evolves into a somewhat sporadic spree of mindless display of sadistic destruction. "The more monumental, imposing, conceited the statue, the more alluring, inviting, beckoning it presumably becomes as a target for expressions of discontent in times of contestation and sociopolitical change" (Marschall 2017, 204).

Beyond investigating the drivers of vandalism, perhaps the question to ask, from a decolonial perspective, is about the motivations behind the state's installation of these tainted monuments. If the history and memories surrounding certain monuments provoke tension in the public, why were they exalted in the public eye in the first instance? Recently, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the President of Nigeria signed a bill for the country to revert to her old national anthem, *Nigeria We Hail Thee*, written in 1960 by Lillian Jean Williams, a British expatriate who lived in Nigeria at the time of the country's transition from colonial rule to independence (Nathaniel 2024). The president's decision implies that the current national anthem, written by a Nigerian—Benedict Odiase (Chukwu et al. 2017)—will be abandoned, embracing the colonial anthem. This postcolonial abnormality has been met with various citizen criticisms, pointing out the government's misplaced priority (Nathaniel 2024). One cannot also

4 The image of the Kano State commemorative monument before and after it was demolished can be seen at https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/604819-real-reason-we-demolished-monument-kano-government.html.

overlook the use of derogatory terms such as “tribe” and “native” in the old anthem. Again, one wonders about the possible justification for such an unpatriotic unearthing and exaltation of the colonial past in an era charged with decolonial consciousness.

On Art Vandalism and the Politics of Value

Against the outright condemnation of vandalism as a social problem, I argue that the value judgment in vandalism is not a right or wrong question but a nuanced complex exercise requiring a multidimensional view of each case. Here, I align with Millie (2011) who proposes that value judgement should be framed around morality (moral codes and legalities), prudence (impact on life and wellbeing), economics (financial costs and economic contributions to society), and aesthetics (beautiful, ugly, or artistic).

Moral Value of Vandalism

The moral value of vandalism is a complex and contentious issue. Is vandalism inherently moral or immoral, or can it possess moral value under certain circumstances? These questions are challenging to answer definitively with a simple yes or no. A significant factor in determining the moral value of vandalism is the implicit question of power. The authority figures, such as the state or custodians of monuments, often hold the power to define and enforce the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Their perspective tends to dominate the discourse, labelling acts of vandalism as immoral. For the owners and custodians of art, vandals are often viewed as trespassers, criminals, and aggressors. In contrast, from the vandals’ perspective, the custodians might be seen as collaborators, enablers, and opportunists who ignore or exploit the struggles and historical marginalisation of certain groups. Thus, they view their actions as a form of resistance or protest against the misuse of power or the perpetuation of injustices. They might view their acts as morally justified efforts to challenge and disrupt systems of oppression.

Most definitions of vandalism typically describe it as acts of destruction, desecration, violation, trespass, damage, defacement, or disfigurement. However, Marschall (2017) argues that these negative labels often reflect the perspective of the state and custodians of monuments. From the perspective of the people, acts of vandalism can sometimes be seen as appropriation, creative modification, rearrangement, or alteration. This shift in perspective highlights the importance of context in judging the value of vandalism.

The context in which vandalism occurs plays a crucial role in shaping its perception and value. Context, in this regard, includes the social, political, and historical circumstances surrounding an act of vandalism. It influences whether an act is seen as a destructive force or a justified response to oppression or marginalisation. For instance, the toppling of statues during social justice protests can be seen as a reclaiming of public spaces from symbols of oppression. Such acts are contextualised within a broader struggle for equality and justice. Conversely, random acts of graffiti on private property might be viewed as lacking a clear sociopolitical context, and thus are judged more harshly.

Since the erection of the 708-kilometre Israeli apartheid wall,[5] installed by the Israeli government to control the movement of Palestinians, the wall has become a site for creative protest and resistance against Israel's perpetuation of racial and territorial subjugation of the Palestinians (Fraihat and Dabashi 2023). In the face of Israel's claimed ownership of the wall and the prohibition and criminalisation of all forms of political graffiti, the creation of these artworks amounts to an admixture of creative and ideological vandalism of the wall. However, as Lai (2020) suggests, such political and ideological vandalism sometimes becomes the only option for counter-speech against the oppressor.

Stemming from this complexity of duality, I align with the egalitarian value of vandalism. Vandalism, in certain contexts, can contribute to the creation of an egalitarian society. If motivated by challenging the dominance of oppressive symbols and reclaiming public spaces, certain acts of art vandalism can be a positive force to ensure that the interests of all members of society are respected. Such acts can be a form of levelling the playing field, where marginalised voices use creative destruction to assert their presence and demand recognition.

Prudential Value of Art Vandalism

Art vandalism, often seen as a destructive act, can hold prudential value by influencing social dynamics and enhancing the quality of life and well-being in nuanced ways. One notable aspect is the social value that arises from acts of vandalism. Vandalism, paradoxically, can bring people together and foster a sense of community. When a common enemy, such as a vandal, disrupts the normal and familiar, it can unite individuals who share a desire to combat this intrusion. This phenomenon often leads to the formation of what Zinganel (2005, 3) terms an "imagined community"—a collective of people who maintain contact and interaction beyond their initial unification against the vandal.

Initially brought together by the need to protect their environment from acts of vandalism, these communities often evolve into more enduring social networks. The shared experience of combating vandalism fosters strong social bonds and a sense of solidarity. These communities can play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and a collective sense of responsibility for the well-being of their environment. Acts of vandalism can also stimulate public discourse and challenge prevailing social and political norms. This dynamic can contribute to a more vibrant and engaged public sphere, where diverse perspectives are expressed and debated. In this way, art vandalism

5 In 2002, citing security concerns, Israel initiated the unilateral construction of a wall aimed at separating Palestinians in the occupied West Bank from Israel, Palestinian-occupied East Jerusalem, and Israeli settlements that were unlawfully established on Palestinian land in the West Bank. For further reading on the apartheid wall, see https://imeu.org/article/israels-west-bank-wall.

can catalyse social change and innovation, enriching the cultural landscape and enhancing the overall quality of life.

Moreover, vandalism can act as a social control mechanism (Zinganel 2005). The presence of vandalism and its associated imagery can instil a protective instinct in people, prompting them to avoid areas perceived as dangerous or lawless. This phenomenon can lead to heightened awareness and vigilance within communities, encouraging residents to take proactive measures to safeguard their environment. While this may initially appear as a negative consequence, it can result in communities becoming more engaged and invested in maintaining public order and safety. Therefore, while vandalism is generally perceived as a negative act, its indirect social value lies in its potential to strengthen communal ties and enhance the social fabric.

Economic Value of Art Vandalism

Millie (2011) holds that when contemplating the economic value of art vandalism, it is crucial to consider both the financial costs and economic contributions to society. Hansen (2015) highlights that 100 million pounds is spent yearly to combat unsanctioned public art in London. This significant expenditure points to a burgeoning industry centred around anti-graffiti efforts, suggesting that the anti-graffiti industry is worth multi-billions. This statement by Hansen (2015) alludes to the business model of vandalism and the number of jobs created through different acts of vandalism in the city, characterised by graffiti and unsanctioned street art.

Bhati and Pearce (2016) underscore that the direct and indirect consequences of vandalism include financial costs incurred from property damage, loss of tourist revenue, discomfort, and the fear of strangers. The financial burden on municipalities and private property owners to repair vandalised properties is substantial, but this scenario also generates economic activity and employment opportunities. For instance, vandalism has necessitated the creation of security companies that specialise in safeguarding empty buildings and keeping vandals and gangs out (Zinganel 2005). These security measures generate jobs and economic activity, thereby contributing to the local economy. Salomon (2018) also notes that cultural institutions rarely implement social and physical guardianship measures until an act of vandalism takes place. This points to the job creation and action-inspiring tendency of vandalism, as security companies specialising in the guardianship of art are given business through these acts. The economic implications extend beyond mere repair and protection; the valuation of art can lead to its commodification, which in turn can lead to its vandalism for potential financial return.

The act of vandalism can paradoxically enhance the economic value of the vandalised art itself. A vandalised piece of work often increases in value due to the drama and story behind it. Some artists even orchestrate the public vandalisation of their works to boost the market and historical value of the vandalised work. Banksy's work serves as a prime example here. His vandalisation of public and privately owned architecture often leads

to an increase in the price of the buildings. This phenomenon underscores how vandalism can transform an ordinary piece into a highly coveted artefact, driving up its market value and creating a lucrative market for collectors and investors. Interestingly, this phenomenon which has increased the notoriety and appraisal of Banksy's art has ultimately made them an endangered species, as they have become targets for vandals who often try to remove them from walls and auction them. Even the state has participated in this scramble for Banksy (Hansen 2015), by protecting, preserving, and sometimes removing it for private consumption and financial returns.

Aesthetic Value of Art Vandalism

Vandalism is often valuable to artists. Certain creative processes demand the defacement and alteration of art pieces. The creative process of Andrew Scott is a typical example in this regard (Pariante 2023). Exploring the theatrical concept of "breaking the fourth wall," where the character speaks to the audience directly, the subjects portrayed in Scott's works interact with the frames that secure their borders. Either through breaking, burning, bending or scarring, the mutilation of the frame and glass that secure the art is the artist's way of completing the story of each piece.

The works of Gordon Matta-Clark also creatively reflect the aesthetics of vandalism. The artist's works mirror the illegal occupation of abandoned buildings by gangs and drug dealers. The specific nature of the drug operation requires them to cut through walls of a building to create a network of hidden passages for the covert movement of drugs and their dealers from one apartment to another. In this regard, Gordon Matta-Clark adopts vandalism as a conceptual force in creating his works. Although he usually seeks permission from the owners of the empty and abandoned buildings he cuts, he creates conceptual imitations of vandalised properties through his art (Zinganel 2005).

With a focus on Banksy's *Slave Labour*, which was removed without notice from a wall in North London, Hansen (2015) argues that vandalism has the potential to create critical social commentary and transform the public. Banksy's *Slave Labour* gained significant media coverage when it appeared in May 2012. Banksy himself is an internationally acclaimed artist whose works have evolved from being perceived as mere vandalism to being recognised as politically, socially, and economically valuable pieces. Consequently, the removal of his work, albeit an act of vandalism, unsurprisingly generated socially transformative reactions from other creatives. This raises an important question: Would the removal of a less popular artist's work or a novice graffiti writer's piece elicit the same reactions?

Contemplating the value of vandalism thus requires a multidimensional assessment of both the vandal and the vandalised. Consider another perspective, such as the case of George Floyd: If he had not died from the police brutality he suffered, he might have remained one of the countless brutalised but unnoticed individuals. However, the gravity of Floyd's case caused a global outrage. Similarly, if *Slave Labour* had not been Banksy's work, its removal might have merely been another money spinner for the anti-

graffiti industry. This suggests that the (re)configuration of the value of vandalism is often subject to a plethora of factors including the identity of the vandal, the historical context of the art, and the gravity of the act.

Conclusion

In this article, the term "art vandalism" encompasses both the vandalism of art by society and society by art. In both cases, these acts are frequently performed as forms of protest and resistance. Scholars like Lai argue that political vandalism is sometimes the only viable response to derogatory pedestalisation, offering a powerful rebuttal against oppressive structures. Thus, the value of vandalism cannot be assessed in isolation. It necessitates understanding the context, the power dynamics at play, and the perspectives of both custodians and vandals. While often perceived negatively, vandalism is a powerful tool for social change, challenging dominant narratives and advocating for a more inclusive and egalitarian society. This duality underscores the need for a nuanced and contextualised approach to evaluating its moral implications.

Art has become both a participant and a context of tension, often caught in the crossfire of global conflicts. During times of crisis, cultural monuments transform into battlegrounds for power struggles between the state and the people, symbolising broader societal discord. Historically, vandalism has been an attempt to erase the history and memory of an undesired entity, attempting to turn insiders into outsiders. This erasure underscores vandalism's political and social dimensions, where the destruction of cultural symbols is used to challenge and resist established narratives. While traditionally viewed in a negative light, vandalism possesses intrinsic value, particularly in how artists have conceptually explored the aesthetics of destruction in their creative processes and in the impact of vandalism on socio-political structures of communication.

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