

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

The Poetic Justice of a Broken Koons

by [Daniel Larkin](#) on December 18, 2012



Broken Jeff Koons sculpture at “No Longer Art” (Image courtesy ccgsapp.org)

Visual puns don’t get much better than this. A little red dog balloon sculpture by the simultaneously celebrated and reviled artist Jeff Koons has finally gotten what it deserves. Damaged and missing a few limbs, it sits on a silver platter like the head of John the Baptist waiting to become the punch line for a joke. But this work is not the product of some overeager Columbia MFA student. It’s actually a total accident. And for the record, it’s no longer worth big bucks because of its damage. A totally worthless Koons?

An exhibition of “non-art,” curated by artist Elka Krajewska through her [Salvage Art Institute](#), is on display at Columbia University’s [Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery](#). But it’s not politicians telling us what art can’t be; it’s now insurance companies. This show displays damaged art objects that insurance companies deemed worthless by a legal maneuver that entitles the owner to an indemnification payment, all because it would be ostensibly impossible to re-sell the damaged

Open goods. Many of these valueless objects are doomed to collect dust in storage, which is a shame since many of them still shine despite, or often because of, their damage.

Walking through the show, the first temptation is to get negative and hone in on the flaws that “ruined” these works. For some, the flaws are easy to spot. Others take some detective work. That tiny broken Koons sculpture, a damaged Cartier-Bresson photo print, and several torn canvases fill the gallery space. Binders of printed emails tell the stories of the damage. The works are displayed on custom-made wheel carts. One can take in different vantage points by moving the carts and observing the paintings’ backsides, with their rips clearly visible.



Installation view of “No Longer Art: Salvage Art Institute” (Image courtesy ccgsapp.org)

In some of the works, it’s a little hard to figure out what the big concern is. Henri Cartier Bresson’s “Pierre Colle, Paris, 1932” still glows with the photographer’s dramatic treatment of light and the dreamy curiosity of its young subject. Whatever damage the work sustained in 2009, if the artistic content is still crystal clear, why does it have no value? If you hung this in your home, couldn’t you still enjoy it with your friends?

Several paintings in the gallery are torn. But does the rip ruin the work? Or might the rip actually jive with the aesthetic and enhance it? For example, in Miguel Florido’s “Solo tu recuerdo sigue aqui” (2007), a tear in an abstract color field that looks like a wrinkled blue sheet strikes the eye as another layer of texture and a 3-D flourish. Although it wasn’t the artist’s intent, it’s an open question whether this fissure makes the piece weaker or stronger.

In other cases, a rip can manifest a well deserved moral judgement. In Alexandre Dubuisson’s “La Moisson” (1850), one beholds a romanticized pastoral scene of farmers. In reality, life was far harder than this rosy vision. The painting casts the lower class as virtuous, happy, content, hard workers as opposed to the bitter truth. Peasants actually endured long gruelling hours in the fields, squalid unsanitary living conditions relative to the elite who profited from their work, and little promise for a better future. Ripping a new one (literally) in this 1-percent narrative seems apt.

In the show’s sculptures, the damage is more apparent and reshapes the works’ content. The red balloon sculpture by Jeff Koons, “Red Balloon Dog Ed. 51/66” (1995) was shattered by a fall and

Openow has some missing limbs. Chester Armstrong's "At the River's Edge" (year unknown) is a wooden figure damaged in transit with a glaring crack in the base. A simple 2002 stone sculpture by an unknown artist with an unknown title broke in half two during a transportation accident.



Alexandre Dubuisson's "La Moisson" (1850) (Image courtesy ccgsapp.org)

But these injuries give the sculptures new meanings. It's hard not to see some poetic justice in the damaged Koons. Few artists could claim to be more resented. One can imagine this shattered red balloon dog getting a ton of laughs over cocktails at an opening. The stoic face of the Armstrong sculpture seems accentuated by the damage nearby. It's one more thing that he's endured. And the broken stone strikes as a zen invitation to contemplate imperfection.

Can one read too much into damage? It all depends on how you choose to engage with art as a viewer. If you insist that a work's meaning is limited to the artist's original intention, then you miss out. If you are open to a more adventurous encounter with an art object, then bring it on. There is time to appreciate an artist's original intent for a moment. Then, there is also time to go on to admire how works can take on second lives and new meanings as time takes its toll.

There is an enchanting poem by Rainer Maria Rilke about interpreting damaged art works. He muses how a missing head on an Apollo statue leads him to admire parts of the body he might not otherwise focus on. He may be stretching it a bit by seeing a smile in Apollo's hips or decoding a message on the body to change his life. But if a poet can't use poetic license, who can? This show is a gift to viewers who, like Rilke, can allow their minds to be wild and free as they view damaged works. We're all missing out if we allow the market's narrow focus, perfectionism, and greed to restrict our access to Koons with missing parts.

No Longer Art: Salvage Art Institute will be on view through December 20 at the Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery inside Buell Hall on the main campus of Columbia University (1172 Amsterdam

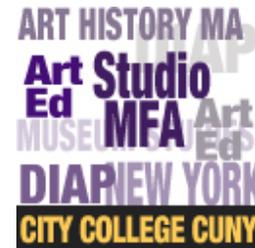
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Tagged as: [Alexandre Dubuisson](#), [Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery](#), [columbia university](#), [Elka Krajewska](#), [Jeff Koons](#)

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**manyfaces** • a day ago

Obligatory link to Cleveland's copy of "The Thinker" with its exploded base.

<http://www.clevelandart.org/co...>

And we all know about the Cimabue Crucifix.

When did damage and aging stop becoming part of the appeal of a piece?

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**Daniel Larkin** > manyfaces • 21 hours ago

Many faces, thanks for sharing these links and references to the damaged Thinker and the Cimbaue. It's had to say or measure whether more or less viewers today see the value in damaged and aged art. I think that the curator's interest was in revealing a relatively new development without precedent in earlier centuries - a work of art that has been declared worthless by a legal act. It can never be sold again from what I understand and the owner gets a compensation payment because it can't be sold. These works are effectively taken out of circulation and end up in a warehouse. Galleries usually display work that they can sell and museums seldom display damaged contemporary art. If it's an old master or an antiquity with damage, that is to be expected in a museum context since that is all that survived. But we see far less contemporary art with scars in museums. I think the logic is that if a similar undamaged work can be found, that would be more true to the artist's vision. So from the perspective of institutional critique, I don't think it's too far off to lament how little time in the sun damaged contemporary art gets in museums and galleries. It takes a university with a different set of agendas to mount this show. I do agree with you that many art viewers are open-minded enough to get a thrill out of the second life of a damaged contemporary work. I just think that museums and galleries get tugged the other way by market pressures and curatorial bias on perfectionism and showing exemplars of an artist's vision rather than accidents that caused permanent damage. But it's a smart question you brought up, so thanks for taking the conversation in this direction, Manyfaces

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**manyfaces** > Daniel Larkin • 18 hours ago

I agree 100% on the "legally worthless" thing being new, interesting, and worth investigating in a museum setting.

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