

Fourteenth St. Jerome Translation Contest

Sponsored by the Conference Management Service of the United Nations Office at Vienna

English

Second prize – Haydn J. Rawlinson

Guernica in Banksy's Shredder

Although the avant-garde believed otherwise, science advances but art does not. This can be seen most clearly in our continued confusion of value and price. Thus, in recent days, we have witnessed two art-world incidents in which the leading role was played by the guiding principle of contemporary aesthetics: money. The first occurred with the revelations about how much Picasso charged the Spanish Republic for painting Guernica; the second, when Banksy doubled the price of his *Girl with Balloon* by shredding it at auction to show that, just like jeans, some paintings cost more when they are in tatters.

Two decades ago, the influential art critic Rosalind Krauss published her book *The Picasso Papers*, an analysis of the artist's collages. The work's premise was that at the same time that the monetary system was abandoning the gold standard to become an abstract convention, art was, through successive abstractions, breaking the bond between representations and their real-world referents. When the Reina Sofía Museum most recently republished Antonio Saura's pamphlet *Against Guernica*, it asked Félix de Azúa to contribute a preface, who obliged with a three-page summary of the conflicting expert interpretations of the mural. Thus, the bull could symbolize either Spain or fascism, brute force or Picasso himself, the protection of the weak or "primordial sexual energy".

The divorce between art and reality and the relationship art has forged with monetary concerns has provided auction houses with prodigious profits and libraries with prodigious books. One such book was published by Lawrence Weschler, a staff writer on *The New Yorker*, in 1999, one year after Krauss published hers. Its title was *Boggs: A Comedy of Values*, and it chronicled the adventures of Stephen Boggs, whose dedicated his life to drawing banknotes and, more particularly, having them accepted as legal currency. When he succeeded, he was fined by the U.S. Treasury Department. Flinching not from his purpose, he tried to pay the fine with notes he had drawn himself. Boggs, who died a few months ago, delighted in telling audiences that the motto "In God We Trust" was first placed on dollar bills just as the currency was abandoning gold-backed convertibility.

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The true power of modern-day creators — be they gods or artists — lies not in giving life to their works but in snuffing it out. Painting a picture is relatively easy: our galleries are bursting at the seams. Destroying one, however, is not a prerogative granted to all; much less half-destroying it so it can be recreated. But Banksy — whose very name evokes the financial sector — did just that in a supreme speculative gesture. The prestige of icons has always depended on the attacks they receive. Iconoclasm is a form of fetishism. Since they removed the bulletproof glass, Picasso's Guernica is no longer what it was. That day, for better and for worse, its price increased and it lost a part of its value. It became a mere Picasso.

By Javier Rodríguez Marcos, El País, 10 October 2018