

Focus on Destruction

KAPUTT: The Academy of Destruction at Tate Modern, October 2017

A response by Mary Paterson

For six days in the summer of 2011, thousands of young people rioted across England. In London, Manchester and the West Midlands they broke into shops, looted property and set buildings ablaze. The riots began on 6th August and effervesced until the 11.th By 13th August, over 3,000 people had been arrested. In time, more than 2,000 people were sent to jail for damaging property, rioting and encouraging others. A mother of two got five months behind bars for receiving a pair of stolen shorts, although she had been asleep while the looting took place. Local police tweeted in celebration of her sentence.

I watched the riots radiate round the country like nerve pain and wondered what was going to change. The answer came quickly: nothing. This surge in activity, this violent outburst, this unpredicted eruption of unspoken feeling would change not a single thing in the fabric of our public space. Instead, it would be suppressed with force, punishment and silence from the political class about the reasons the riots took place. It would be met, in other words, by a surge of activity: a violent outburst, an unpredicted eruption of power, grinding the lives of the rioters under the heel of the state.

This is the story of destruction in our society: destructive energy is always negative (rioting) unless it is wielded by people in power (government crackdown); when it's wielded by people in power, of course, it's called something like 'order', or 'the national interest', or 'austerity'. But, say the organisers of *KAPUTT: Academy of Destruction*, this dialectical narrative is all wrong. 'Far from being a failure or a flaw of the system "Creative Destruction" has long been identified as a main feature and a crucial strength of our capitalist economy.'¹ Conceived and created by Sibylle Peters of Theatre of Research (Germany), *KAPUTT* is a transgenerational art project in residence at Tate Exchange from 26th to 29th October 2017. "It's time" they say, in point three of their manifesto, "to reclaim destruction from the bad guys."²

Visitors are greeted at the entrance to Tate Exchange, on the fifth floor of Tate Modern's new extension, and given worksheets to complete in order to gain a certificate of destruction. There is a resource room full of books and films, but most of this cavernous space is set aside for doing, and undoing. A fabric screen, partially destroyed so that you can walk through it, marks the entrance to a loosely partitioned area called the Assembly Hall. When I first arrive, the artist Ansuman Biswas is leading a workshop here, encouraging people to make houses out of plasticine. A few moments later, he tells them to stamp on what they have made. Creation. Destruction.

¹ Letter from the organizers of *KAPUTT* to potential participants, 2017

² *Transgenerational Video Manifesto of Destruction*, October 2017

Past the assembly hall, there is a collection of old books, tea bags, scissors, glue and wool, next to a makeshift gallery space. These are the remains of Milam Knizak's performance score *Killing the Books*; we are invited to rip up the books and use the materials to make something new. Destruction. Creation.

And because we're at Tate Exchange, all of this activity takes place against the backdrop of the spectacular London skyline. On the other side of the river squats St. Paul's Cathedral, its soaring dome dwarfed, these days, by the silhouettes of new tower blocks, punching toughened glass into the sky. Whichever way you look, the horizon is animated by cranes: dismantling something or building something, or both. The city is a moving sculpture of creation and destruction, an automaton generated by the constant churn of people, money and ideas.

After his workshop, Ansuman Biswas brings his son into the hall. Oshin is a polite, self-controlled 12 year old boy, who sits down at a cello and starts to play. His father opens a box of tools and takes out a hammer. Tap. He hits the cello. Oshin is still playing. Tap tap. Long, sombre notes ring out across the room. Eventually, the artist exchanges his son's bow for a saw; and still Oshin continues playing. He is sawing the strings as he goes. They roar and scream beneath his gentle hand. The audience watches in silence as the slow destruction of the cello occupies the room.

KAPUTT is a collaboration between three institutions: Theatre of Research, Tate Early Years and Families Programme, and the Live Art Development Agency. It is, in other words, borne of institutions; and it performs its own institutionalism with gusto. The Academy is an artistic frame devised for this project, run by a faculty of twelve people – six adults, six young people – who all wear T-shirts printed with the *KAPUTT* logo, and wheel around the room on individual, high-backed, office chairs. The project is structured in institutional language – when faculty members meet it is called 'being in session', there are tables and a sofa in a 'common room', and *KAPUTT*'s ideas are organised into a 'commitment', a method statement and a manifesto.

More viscerally, however, the space *feels* institutional. Specifically, it feels like a space of quiet industry, like a local library. People – not just faculty members, but also the visitors who weave easily between sessions and activities – listen carefully and respectfully to each other, clicking fingers to signal agreement. People speak in gentle, low voices. People watch and listen and wait, with the same concentrated energy they use to speak, dance, sing. During a talk on the eleven best scenes of destruction in animé and computer games (led by faculty members Chese and Sam), the evacuation alarm goes off. Nobody wants to be on the fifth floor of a landmark, central London building during an emergency evacuation. But we get up, quickly and quietly, and file out of the Tate. It's a false alarm, and an hour or so later we reconvene: to resume the conversation, and to resume the respectful, attentive mood.

This residency is dedicated to Gustav Metzger, the German-British artist who died earlier in 2017. Metzger was the architect of Auto-Destructive Art (ADA), art that destroys itself automatically, mechanically, and within 20 years. He arrived in the UK on the Kinder transport during World War II, a German Jew whose family was murdered in the Holocaust.

His lifetime was characterised by fascism, warfare and environmental destruction. But ADA was more than just a reflection of the mechanistic evils of western society; it was also a way of working through them for a better future. “I don’t destroy;” he said, “I create ideas that can go beyond the present chaos.”³

This is the project of KAPUTT – exploring what lies *beyond* chaos. The space hums with a shared focus that transforms destruction into community. ‘The “we” I have in mind is not identity-based,” writes the critical theorist Irit Rogoff, talking about alternative ways of participating in culture. “[...] Rather, it comes into being fleetingly as we negotiate a problem, a mood, a textual or cultural encounter, a moment of recognition.’⁴ Likewise, *KAPUTT* requires participants to engage in an active community of thought. It is inclusive because it is bound by time rather than identity – what you think is less important than the fact that you are thinking.

I notice that one of the faculty members’ chairs has the words ‘NO HIRARKY’ scratched into its plastic covering. I don’t know when it happened or who it belongs to, but there it is, hanging out in the corner of the room with the half destroyed shell of the cello. On a simple level, the letters spell out a statement – no hierarchy, not even of language, education or spelling. On another level, it is a joke – the words are scratched into a chair that belongs to someone with status. Combining both elements, the gesture becomes a question – if you don’t believe in hierarchy, then how do you negotiate rules? And this in turn becomes an invitation to think – who are rules made for; who are they made by; who has to keep to them? Or, as the Academy says, in its own research questions:

- *Why are we not supposed to destroy anything, while others do?*
- *Who decides what is destruction and what is not?*
- *Who has permission to destroy and why?*

The first day of *KAPUTT* generates more questions to accompany these, in an interactive session led by Peters. *Does destruction have a role in our economy? Does destruction have a role in our politics?* The questions are painted on the wall of Tate Exchange by Ruqiya, a faculty member known as the Kickboxing Philosopher. *Is the relationship between creation and destruction changing?*

Before I came, I expected the ‘destruction’ of *KAPUTT* to out-perform the ‘academy’, but in fact I find it is the other way round. The deliberate frame of the Academy distributes destruction to everyone participating in its community of thought. This is a form of institutional critique that doubles back on itself – the *Academy of Destruction* is both the subject and the method of enquiry. I brought my son along even though, at four years old, I worried he would be too young; I was wrong about that, too. My son spends a very contented half hour studiously cutting up pieces of wool and sticking them onto cardboard.

³ Quoted in William Grimes, ‘Obituary of Gustav Metzger’, *New York Times* (3rd August 2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/arts/design/gustav-metzger-dead-auto-destructive-artist.html>

⁴ Rogoff, Irit ‘Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture’ in Butt, Gavin ed. *After Criticism* (Blackwell, 2005), pp. 117-134, p. 123

“He’s never this quiet,” I mouth, wide eyed, to other adults. After a while I realise that his fascination is due, in part, to the fact that he’s never been allowed to use scissors before.

I may have brought him here for the destruction, but it seems he stayed for the feeling of trust. And that trust is all the more meaningful because it exists in an environment in which power is being performed. This (fictional) institution questions all the other institutions we live by – my son’s school, for example, and our family. Crucially, this questioning does not progress as a series of opposites pitted against each other, but as an organic mode of mutual development. Crouched on the floor of Tate Exchange with his new found tools, my son gains some permission and some power, but I do not give them up. This is not a transaction, but a dialogue.

After a while, he proudly shows me what he has made – a wool and cardboard creation he names the *Bullet Master 5000*. This whole endeavour, of course, was about his idea; it really had nothing to do with the destructive potential of scissors. “When you think about it, all acts of creation involve destruction, too” says the researcher Heike Roms, in her presentation on the history of destruction in art. And this does not just mean that destruction and creation are two ways of describing the same activity, but also that destruction is more than an activity: it’s also a context, a reason, a consequence, an afterlife.

KAPUTT is careful to place itself inside artistic and intellectual histories of destruction. That destroyed-fabric we walked through at the start was actually a re-enactment of Metzger’s work *Acid Painting* (1961); meanwhile, the resource room shows dozens of artists and activists who use destruction as a creative force. Altogether, this context builds a network of ideas that gives legitimacy to those generated in this space. While the temporality of the residency forces us to think, then, the temporal continuity of these histories gives our thoughts the potential for real world impact. In the video manifesto made during *KAPUTT* and screened on its final day, a teenager calls for schools to be destroyed. He means, destroy the curriculum by teaching more lessons about black history. In the wider context – of his thought process, as well as the context that takes his thoughts seriously - ‘destroy schools’, is a welcoming idea: not a call to arms, but a call for inclusion.

The teenagers who rioted in 2011 will be all grown-up now, such is the rapid destruction of youth. What has happened to them? Who knows. At the time, there were headlines about promising young people (usually, people of colour) whose criminal records would halt their paths to progress. The headlines, like the government backlash they were part of, were designed to enact this *who knows*, alongside its corollary, *who cares?* The rioters were the enemy: the destroyers of our peace and freedom. Their freedom had to be destroyed as a result.

The official response, played out in the words and actions of the political class, never considered the teenagers’ freedom to be in public space, or indeed their freedom to be in institutions like public libraries. The riots happened a year into the Conservative government’s ‘austerity’ measures, designed to curb public spending and practiced to shut down communal spaces for people who can’t pay. By definition, children can’t pay. But

while the destruction of communal space crept up gradually, the trigger for the riots was the destruction of a life: the police shooting of a young, unarmed, black man, Mark Duggan.

There is no justice in this dialectic. Police brutality does not justify violence on the streets (and the riots also became a conduit for widespread criminal behaviour). Neither did the riots justify the level of police and judicial brutality meted out in response. “What is peace, in the eyes of a young person?” asks Zeynep, one of KAPUTT’s faculty, in a question that shoots straight to the dynamic felt so keenly by those who have less power, but wielded so callously by those who have more. The lesson of Metzger’s ADA is that the social forces of destruction are not part of a balancing act destined to reach equilibrium, but movements in a single machine: a single logic driving to a single conclusion. This means that a young person’s peace can always be reconciled with an adult’s (for example), even though our culture still prefers to watch them fight.

When Metzger put Auto-Destructive artworks into galleries, he was bringing power to bear on itself – not destroying art, but redeploying the destructive tendencies of its environment in order to look at them anew. How can the systems of art and society survive the systems of art and society? What happens to power when it participates in its own rules? Or, as KAPUTT might say, what happens when you rescue destruction from the bad guys? The bad guys, says the manifesto, are those that “find an enemy to use destruction against” – those who would rather start a war than a conversation.

Despite their heritage, these ideas are radical indeed. Looking out over a city that is busy paving private spaces over public ones, KAPUTT enacts an expansive mode of inclusion that does not limit or even protect the communities it is drawn from. It describes itself as ‘transgenerational’, for example – using ‘trans’, from the Latin meaning ‘across’, ‘beyond’, ‘through.’ This is not just a space for different generations to be together, then, but for what lies across, beyond, through the generations. Across difference, perhaps; through participation. Beyond chaos.

Welcoming all ages is rare enough in a world that shuttered inter-generational relationships into the private rooms of the family home, but it’s even more unusual to see people of all ages here - running round a public space that also includes scissors, diamonds, hacksaws and expensive AV equipment. Faculty member Zoe Laughlin invites people to help her break, smash and re-make things using equipment she has acquired from the Argos catalogue. Children join her at the ‘Altar of Destruction’ to crush a diamond with a vice. Another helps her feed some goo into a shredder. “Laser focus!” Laughlin shouts, as she invites people to wreak havoc with her materials. Here, too, the activity is predicated on trust and attention. Everyone’s welcome, but you’re expected to take responsibility for yourself.

While this is going on I have my back to the London skyline, its material (if not its fabric) trampled and rebuilt and trampled and rebuilt since the riots six years ago. High rise after high rise of concatenated flats line up like other people’s bank notes, all over the city. I’ve lived here all my life, so my old neighbourhoods are destroyed, my memories reshaped into luxury flats and new business quarters.

A few weeks before *KAPUTT*, an older tower-block was engulfed in flames: Grenfell Tower, an icon of a different era (just one generation ago) when the state built social housing. The residents of Grenfell were poor, by London standards, which means they had no power. But they foresaw the destruction ahead. They laid out the details in letters and petitions to the private company that managed the building. The tower was unsafe. It was a fire hazard and an evacuation risk. 'It is a truly terrifying thought,' wrote the Grenfell Action Group in November 2016, 'that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord.'⁵

In their letter of invitation to faculty members, *KAPUTT*'s organisers wrote, 'Being at the core of the system and still banned from the social realm, destruction seems to lash back on us in many different ways.' Refusing to face up to destruction is a refusal to acknowledge reality. It has horrific results.

Grenfell Tower was destroyed by fire on 14th June 2017. The exterior cladding, recently installed for aesthetic reasons, turned the Tower into an inferno. Residents were trapped. Scores of people died in their homes. When I first smelt the burning debris float across London in clouds of shame, I wondered what would change. Months later, the answer has arrived: nothing. Nobody has been held accountable for the fire at Grenfell. Hundreds of dispossessed residents remain homeless. All this destruction, all this death, all this crushing of the powerless in the name of profit for the few, has not changed a single thing in the fabric of the city. It *is* part of the fabric of the city, its polluting breath pumped into our lungs, with the simple logic of a machine.

It's time to destroy the machine.

But, as *KAPUTT* tells us, destruction is not the same as revenge. Destruction is creative and creation is change. This means the only way to destroy the machine is to change its focus. And this focus is the legacy of *KAPUTT*—a 'laser focus', a mode of attention developed through a community of shared endeavour and trust. It looks a bit like an institution, and a bit like the kitchen at a party where all the most interesting conversations take place. It sounds like a cello wailing its final notes above the city. The cello takes a long time to go. With each new gash and tear it becomes a new instrument, something lost and something gained. Listen carefully, the cello is singing. Pay attention.

⁵ Jen Mills 'Tower block fire safety warnings 'fell on deaf ears', residents' group claims' *Metro*, 14th June 2017
<http://metro.co.uk/2017/06/14/tower-block-fire-safety-warnings-fell-on-deaf-ears-residents-group-claims-6707156/>