

Jane Benson: *Half-Truths*

It's difficult for us not to instinctually duck our heads, clench our eyes, and conceive of destruction as anything other than a hostile act producing injury, trauma, tragedy or worse. When observed in art, curator Justin Hoffmann proclaims with soaring gravitas, "Artistic destruction is the first ascertainment of the apocalypse. The apocalyptic artist takes on the role of a prophet of doom. He is simultaneously perpetrator (destroyer) and victim (of the catastrophe). Auto-destructive art is the art of a time at the end of time." 1 When applied to the notion of a collective body and destruction on a societal scale, many fear the ramifications of revolution and grow all the more nostalgic towards a romantic past and the endangered present. Much like anesthesia and sovereignty, the status quo can be remarkably soothing. But, as Museum Tinguely Director Roland Wetzler counters, "Every creative act is always also an act of destruction, in that existing forms are called into doubt and dismembered, re-combined or re-thought." 2 And, while ruination may still be unnerving to most, critic and theorist Boris Groys coyly argues that "the worst thing that can be said of an artist continues to be that his/her work is harmless." 3 As such, artists across the 20th century have embraced the paradox, activating the creative potential of artistic destruction for a variety of ends. Amongst this pioneering vanguard, Swiss kinetic artist Jean Tinguely (1925-1991) eschewed fearful misgivings of his riotous, "metamechanical" art in favor of what he called a "life very intensive". 4 German-British artist and agitator Gustav Metzger (1926-2017) championed the idea of self-destructive art while challenging the industrial complex, but passionately decried, "I am not a Luddite. I don't destroy; I create ideas that can go beyond the present chaos. I have always seen auto-destructive art as a constructive force." 5

Artist Jane Benson continues this lineage and pushes it into an ever more inventive and humanistic, if still ambivalent context, declaring: "unfortunately, I've developed a destructive side to my personality and it's apparent in every single body of my work over the past 10 years." 6 In her hands, fracture is the most accurate reflection of our present, and the most necessary precursor of tomorrow – echoing Groys' identification of iconoclasm as, "a mechanism of historical innovation" and "a means of revaluing values." 7 She is self-professedly "more comfortable with something being destabilized rather than complete," systematically deconstructing "the experience of the everyday" as what art historian and critic Nait Banait calls "an accumulation of contexts, habits and environments that can be reshaped once they are revealed as artificial." 8 Piercing the enduring, if no less illusory integrity of the gestalt, she confronts objects, words and environs that have ossified into absolutes – taking them apart and putting them back together to produce vexing new formations. She is not alone in this approach, which has migrated to a number of neighboring fields. In the early 20th century, Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950) popularized the term "creative destruction" in the world of finance to describe the transformative process that accompanies radical innovation. In the 21st century destruction is an ever more evolving hydra with many of its new heads entering intangible arenas like chemical weapons, identity theft and cyber warfare. In this expanded context, curator Chris Sharp argues that material destruction in art can seem quaintly anachronistic – "a kind of artisanal, craft-oriented affair" – whose elegiac palpability "becomes somehow affirmative and even human." 9 With a delicate, but poignant approach to dismantling and rebuilding, Benson's work has been described in a similar spirit, as "industrial production meets cottage industry handiwork." 10 She locates fertile possibility in the fragments of old,

translating that which was once seen as a threat to humanity – destruction – into one of our most salient signifiers.

A history of constructive destruction in art has yet to be fully documented, but Groys affirms that “There is no doubt that the art of the 20th century thematized destruction more extensively and in a more radical way than any art before it.”¹¹ Spurred by the incendiary, often nihilistic writing of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and others, avant-garde artists felt empowered to create new icons in, and with, the ashes of old.¹² As eager agents of negation and subversion towards traditional forms of art (and the values they represented), their radicalism was gauged by the level of disruption wrought.¹³ Such a trajectory could include the “unfinished” compositions of Édouard Manet, Claude Monet and the Impressionists, Paul Cézanne and the collapse of three dimensional mimicry, Cubism’s kaleidoscopic fracture of the figure and object, Futurism, Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematism, dada, and Lucio Fontana’s slashes – right on through to happenings, Fluxus, Viennese Actionism and Nouveau Réalisme. It must be said that the impulse to destroy was not the sole motivating factor in many, if not all of these movements, but rather an ideological instrument deployed to pursue new forms of artistic, social and political liberties. Since the 1960s, as the profile and legacy of many of these artists grew, it became increasingly fashionable to use destruction in both performance and object “making” as what the aforementioned Wetzel calls “a form-giving force.”¹⁴ There have also been a litany of exhibitions in the new millennium that survey the destructive tide in art, including *Under Destruction* (2010) at Museum Tinguely and the Swiss Institute, *Disarming Matter* (2008) at Dunkers Kulturhus in Sweden, and *Big Bang: Creation and Destruction in 20th Century Art* (2005) at Centre Pompidou in Paris. The latter was a sprawling portrait of ostensibly antagonistic approaches that propelled modernism across the 20th century – from the disenfranchisement of traditional subjects in art and the dislocation of the figure to the blurring of perspective and the redefinition of what constitutes an art object. With such widespread employment and institutional embrace, however, can destruction still be considered radical? Addressing this conundrum, curator Gianni Jetzer rightfully asks, “How is destruction deployed in today’s art? Is destruction to be considered merely an additional color or is it still a radical gesture? Does it itself have a meaning or is it just a mere vehicle?”¹⁵

Benson’s work is neither about replicating the obliteration that has come before her, nor about nullifying its nullifications. Her practice employs the capacity of breaking and (re)building as both subject and object; meaning and material; as a reflection of the present and a contemplation of the future. Fracture is the norm here, rather than a revolution. In the company of artists like Gordon Matta-Clark, Yoko Ono and Kader Attia, Benson’s cuts, cracks and bricolage simultaneously attack existing parameters, while also constituting a place for renewal and gathering. In another insightful and historically referential gesture, she has described herself as a “beleaguered optimist,” and her practice as “broken romanticism.”¹⁶ Romanticism was a 19th century European movement spanning art, music and literature that emphasized emotion and individualism; a glorification of history and the natural world, and stood ardently against the Industrial Revolution, Enlightenment norms, and the scientific rationalization of nature. As a step back to elemental pleasures and passions, Romanticism was rooted in the 18th century German *Sturm und Drang* (“Storm and Drive/Urge”) movement that encouraged unfettered emotion to break aristocratic constraints and find inspiration within oneself. At the core of these actions and aspirations

was the singular, heroic artist who would elevate society by reawakening visceral experiences of everything from terror to awe. In several of Benson's early series including *The Chronicles of Narcissism* (2006), *Oroborus* (2008) and *The Mews* (2009), she confronts questions of individual versus collective identity via mutation, multiplication and taxidermied swans. As she plucks the latter's plumage, twists its head and wings into knots, and multiplies the trauma by way of mirrors, Benson wrestles with art's privileging of the beauty and grace that the swan embodies. In subsequent works within these series, swans, sparrows and their disembodied wings are married with human busts and body parts – producing unsettling amalgams that skew ideals of purity, autonomy and what constitutes “the natural” in both the human and animal world. In so doing, Benson evokes a number of Romanticism's most fundamental icons and tenets, while simultaneously unhooking its architecture of essentialism and individualism. Moreover, by embracing camouflage and its elusiveness in works such as *Underbush* and *Fatigue* (both 2004), Benson plots an alternate course where self-representation and environmental surroundings are collapsed upon one another. In concert with her other early works, we see, in Banai's assessment, “instantiations of the artist's likeness, metonymic stand-ins,” and the fleeting traces of Benson's artistic fingerprints. 17 In the fray, the solitary hero of romanticism gives way to the cipher of a singular self, and to the onset of a multiplied, mercurial being.

In the typically ego-laden realm of self-portraiture, Benson continues her measured, but no less systematic campaign of destruction on both the composition and subject of artistic autonomy. In relation to the history of destruction in art, the aforementioned Groys relays a theory that such aggression was directed towards the artwork as a symptom of nihilistic resignation. 18 That is to say, when one believes that an effective resistance cannot be mounted against the forces of an oppressive external world, the subject redirects their actions against the makings of themselves. Groys ultimately disagrees with this implied masochism – arguing that the avant-garde artist directed their aggression to that which *enslaved* subjectivity. Benson, however, channels this notion of auto-destruction into a provocative arena where the individual author/aura is compromised. Her pseudo-classical works featuring faceless marbled busts (i.e. *Wig Head [Ann and Jane]*, 2006) and smoking jackets sliced to fall in graceful, feathery tatters (i.e. *Bitches*, 2004) eventually culminate in the pivotal series *Rubbings of Me* (2008). 19 To purposefully thwart the conventional process of portraiture Benson draped sheets of muslin over her torso and face, then reached around and blindly rubbed her countenance with conte crayon. The ensuing, partial portraits are spontaneous actions that Benson does not refine or re-work – mapping herself as alien terrain in a portrait of/as the other. In her words, “Even though the drawing represents me, I am absent from the work as the self-portraits are not recognizable as me.” 20 Thereby celebrating her obscured visage (and authorship), she revels in the reality that “every drawing...looks like a different person” and paradoxically embraces, “the freedom that creating these works provided; they offered an instant freedom from myself.” 21 Much like crude 3D renderings without the glasses we require to reconcile the attendant forms, her cloudy portraits float in and out of focus – splitting the subject into a nebulous constellation.

An unblemished whole seems a far less sincere way to represent our current state of being – particularly regarding geography and global migration – than an archipelago of fissures and forms. In 2011, Benson's seminal series *The Splits* was inspired by her curiosity to peer inside stringed musical instruments, “[see]

something we're never permitted to see," and turn a singular quantity into a revelatory dialectic. 22 To do so, she bisected a number of violins, violas and cellos – converting cheap, mass produced instruments (which serious musicians consider "fake") into vessels of/for originality. By slicing the wooden objects down the center, Benson establishes a scenario where these uncanny "halves" *must* be played together, by more than one person, to register a full tonal scale. In this necessarily dialogical arena that she dubs a "graceful passage for imagined evolution," individual actions are rendered inferior as Benson institutes a collaborative model of performance. 23 As a newly cobbled catalyst for both musicality and gathering, she explains that "in the destruction or the halving of the instrument you destroy the original aesthetic identity, but...[re-invent] the instrument and [create] new community." 24 When performed, the ensuing range of tonality produced by the split instruments has been aptly described by Benson's collaborator and composer Matt Schickele as "alien folk music." 25 With this reading he evokes German dada artist Hugo Ball's (1886-1927) description of a 1916 simultaneous poem performed at the Cabinet Voltaire in Zurich, which featured parallel recitations, singing, whistling, and noises that Ball considered "superior to the human voice" for their ability to represent "the inarticulate, the disastrous, the decisive." 26 Benson's multi-authored pursuit of alternate instrumentation continued in 2013 when she paired two musicians in an uncanny white room to recreate titles from *Rolling Stone Magazine's* catalog of the top 100 guitar songs of all time. The particular choices of *She's Lost Control* and *Crossroad Blues* could not be more apropos for Benson's delegation of authorship and conspicuous absence on camera. Instead, in an exploratory duet, these anonymous guitarists become agents of Benson's symbiotic concert – clad in black from head to toe in a cabinet whose sleek lines slide from wall to floor, outside an identifiable place or time. In the succeeding work *Extended Play* (2013), Benson situates another pair of guitarists in New York City and Mexico City, "to," in her words, "imagine new forms of transcultural communication between two disparate parts of the world." 27 As these two men subsequently search to find elusive, but no less desired harmony across an online bridge (Skype), she disrupts and reformulates their dialogue and diaspora – mapping terrain that meanders between the real and the unreal.

The written scores for many of *The Splits* performances read much like redacted texts as Benson scribbles away notes that the respective instruments can no longer play – effectively remapping their tonal landscape. In so doing, these fragmentary pages serve as a foreshadowing for the 2016 work *Song for Sebald* where Benson methodically revises WG Sebald's 1995 novel *The Rings of Saturn*. The self-exiled German author Winfried Georg Sebald (1944-2001) was heralded as one of the greatest living writers of his era as he wrestled with the devastation of World War II and its affect upon the German psyche. Themes of memory, loss and decay – of civilizations and traditions, as well as physical entities – are correspondingly prominent in his writing, as seen in his calmly devastating 1999 anthology *On the Natural History of Destruction*. 28 Sebald also made a habit of including black and white photos in his volumes (i.e. *Austerlitz*) that often work as counterpoints to the neighboring texts, drawing an intriguing parallel to an early work by Benson titled *Apocalyptically Optimistic* (2000). Channeling her beleaguered romanticism for this particular anthology, Benson altered every photo in 27 travel guidebooks – replacing buildings and manmade structures with amorphous shrubbery and elemental landscapes. This blend of travelogue, biography, myth and memoir similarly characterizes Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*: an account of a nameless narrator who walks Suffolk, England and describes the places he sees and people he encounters, as well as various episodes of history and literature (i.e. the silkworm cultivation to Europe and the

writings of Thomas Browne). Marrying walking tour and meditation, this tale's conspicuous omission of quotation marks further blurs the distinction between author, narrator and subject – creating a floating voice to map a place marrying fact and fantasy. In *Song for Sebald*, Benson adds a number of additional voices into this already populous mix, carefully excising every part of the text except for the syllables of a musical scale to uncover what she calls the “potential music” of the novel. An operatic performance of this excavated music by multiple performers follows as Benson collaboratively composes a score based on the spaces between the “found” notes and emotive tone of Sebald's prose. 29 Taken as a whole, this work stitches together remnants, absences and imaginings into what Benson calls, “a process of collaboration that links together nationalities, disciplines, genders and fields of creative work.” 30 By locating a connecting thread in a tangle of dislocation, she also channels Sebald's ability to reflect the creative potential of estrangement and disorientation in his stories – where the plight and promise of dislocated people is entwined.

This path continues in *Finding Baghdad* (2015) as Benson convenes elements of *Song for Sebald*, *The Splits* and *Extended Play* to tell the story of an Iraqi family's relationship across turbulent geographical and emotional terrain. Her early works again provide insightful precedence, as the 2005-2006 *Disco Globe* and 2006 installation *Mirror Globe (Map of the World)* transform the globe as a staple of orientation into a shiny, but no less unsettling mosaic – fracturing the reflection of the viewer who is everywhere and nowhere on this world. The next chapter of this tale, of two Iraqi brothers forcibly divided by war and the whims of immigration policy, is not one of nostalgia or utopian longing for the nuclear family. Instead, it is one that attempts to reformulate how the family operates in this atomized state of affairs. *Finding Baghdad* is a two-channel video installation that begins with the splitting of two mass-produced Iraqi instruments – an oud and a djoze – as both a reflection of, and an antidote to, the family's pan-global separation. Between Cologne, Germany and Sanad, Bahrain, estranged brothers Bassem Hawar and Saad Mahmood Jawad play a stirring duet via Skype – “speaking” to one another in a disjointed, but ultimately cathartic musical language that weaves distance into dialogue. The medium swells with message here in a post-McLuhan fashion, but cannot fully contain it, as writer Matthew Hart highlights Benson's capacity to “restore the full tonal range to the experience of exile and separation.” 31 Absence and displacement are crucial pieces of content here, and thus, while Benson orchestrates the bridge she does not choreograph the passage – working carefully to minimize her visible presence and expand the plurality of voices. Recognizing this sensitive deferral of authorship, Hart notes that, “Although Benson's cameras linger on them, she doesn't pry; we can only tell how the brothers feel about their reunion by listening to their music and by watching their beautifully mobile and adept faces and hands.” 32 The music they subsequently weave is therapeutic but always and ever incomplete, reflecting a schism that will never be completely reconciled or healed. In a parallel way, we can never see the brothers simultaneously in this installation – a turn to one requires a turn *away* from the other – but their cobbled sound nevertheless fills the space. It is immersive and unknowable, for much like its authorship, we cannot identify where one musician ends and the other begins.

Relatives spread across various parts of the world under a variety of circumstances has become the norm rather the exception, amplifying the need to reinvent the language and iconography of family. As an artist, observer and subject, Benson employs this post-national condition as her foil and muse. As a

sister work to *Finding Baghdad*, Benson's series of *Family Portraits* (2015) assault and amalgamate the respective locations of the displaced Iraqi family by way of national flags that have been shredded and woven together. In so doing, the symbolically-loaded avatars of Iraq, Bahrain, Germany, Norway, United Arab Emirates, United States of America, Turkey and China are simultaneously obscured and reconfigured to more accurately reflect the affiliations of their evolving citizenry. A typically iconoclastic and inflammatory gesture is, however, rendered affirmative in this work as Benson replaces the illusionistic emblems of wholeness with a more authentic manifestation of those who live these places. These methodically woven flags are neither a utopian portrait of globalism nor a dystopian condemnation of trans-national being, but rather contingent cartographies that reflect (and project) a population in flux. Benson's colorful, if circuitous use of line to speak this fledgling language is echoed in the haunting drawings she makes by attaching colored pencils to her split instruments. The ensuing path of these pencils across large sheets of paper taped together evokes Sebald's anonymous explorer as he mapped Suffolk – moving across frontier terrain with curious, but uncertain steps. They are looping and meandering in nature, forgoing a linear course to forge an exploratory collage that in turn, connects with the many performers of Benson's split instruments. The surface/s of these drawings are crudely joined, and those seams are further amplified by the spiro-graphic orbit of each colored pencil – producing a map that continuously reiterates its splits and borders. In this way they resemble Benson's rubbings of herself, and their disorienting, but emancipatory subdivision of subjectivity. Their circular trajectory also speaks to cycles of injury and obsession, as well as a meditative action that has no intention of an end.

While destruction and art-making appear to exclude one another by their very definitions, their uneasy, but ultimately generative exchange has re-shaped the face of both art and the world it reflects. This kind of assault is not about an apocalyptic end of days or learning from the ground up, but rather about the renewal of our perceptual compass to navigate terrain that is re-arranging itself, continuously, whether we like it or not. Yet in this current context, where "destruction is," according to curator Gianni Jetzer, "an artistic commonplace of self-expression", he argues that the artist of today must have a level of "discipline" in its exercise, "not to overdo it." ³³ In critic Richard J. Goldstein's description of her "carefully considered destructive nature," it seems apparent that Benson has heeded this call and practiced its skillful measures – quietly, but consistently pushing concepts and objects to both sides of collapse. ³⁴ For curator Elizabeth Barnett, Benson's work "[forces] us to look closely at the objects (and ideas) we take for granted" as she recognizes the illusory nature of absolutes and the realities of adaptation. ³⁵ A year after the horrific destruction wrought on September 11th, 2001 in New York City, Benson was commissioned by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and World Financial Center to furnish the lobby of the latter with a series of fake topiaries she titled *Happy Faux Flora* (2002). Without cynicism or resignation, she presented "artificial plants in their natural habitats" – cutting the leaves and flowers of synthetic flora into unnatural geometric shapes. In making something *more* fake feel less fictive, Benson created an arguably more "authentic" rendering of the synthetic nature we experience on a daily basis.

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In her every object and action Benson embraces entropy, evincing Banai's observation that, "While the cut is a formative element in the configuration of this expanded field, there is an uneasy sense that these elements are simultaneously held together by tenable threads that may unravel with only the gen-

tlest tug." 37 For this reason, *A Place for Infinite Tuning* (2015) may be the most synecdochical of all Benson's series – congregating split instruments, spliced flora and precarious mirrored plinths into three dimensional cubist arrangements that teeter with graceful tension. In a place of perpetual becoming, or perhaps imminent undoing, their contingency speaks to a heightened, but unstable state that is as true of the object, as us, the observer. Every ostensible "still life" in this *place for infinite tuning* is anything but static, and our perspective grows kaleidoscopic as the view is multiplied across fractal mirrored planes. We see ourselves in this palimpsest, but the hand of the artist is inconspicuous once again – manifest in little more than Velcro straps that hold the bifurcated instruments together. It is to her credit and contingency that everything here feels like it has always been this way. We cannot look more closely or study more intensely to know this constellation any better; they are, like all her works, evocative, elusive and enigmatic at once. This is the truth of Benson's half-truths.

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- ¹ Justin Hoffmann, "The Machine that Destroyed Itself," in *Under Destruction* (Berlin: Distanz Verlag), 138.
- ² Roland Wetzels, "Introduction," in *Under Destruction*, 24
- ³ Boris Groys, "Constructing Nothingness," in *Under Destruction*, 147.
- ⁴ Jean Tinguely Cited in Wetzels, 23. In stark contrast to Justin Hoffmann's apocalyptic assessment of Jean Tinguely's 1960 performative installation *Homage to New York*, curator Gianni Jetzer interprets the now iconic Tinguely work as "a joyous manifestation," an "affirmation," and a spectacle to be enjoyed.
- ⁵ Gustav Metzger cited in Groys, 151. For a parallel reference spanning farther abroad, Shiva is one of the principal deities of Hinduism, and is known as the "destroyer and transformer" within the Trimurti (the Hindu trinity that includes Brahma and Vishnu). Shiva is responsible for change in the form of death and destruction, as well as for destroying the ego and false identification with form.
- ⁶ Jane Benson cited in Richard J. Goldstein, "The Splits" interview with Jane Benson, *BOMB* magazine, October 5, 2010.
- ⁷ Groys cited in Gianni Jetzer & Chris Sharp, "Under Destruction – An Exchange of Ideas," in *Under Destruction*, 37.
- ⁸ Benson cited in *BOMB*; Nuit Banai, "Siting the Everyday" in *New Views: World Financial Center*, catalog by World Financial Center Arts & Events, NYC 2003
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 39
- ¹⁰ N. Goggin & J. Squier, "Context, Place and Transformation," *Ninthletter* magazine, April 2005.
- ¹¹ Groys, 147.
- ¹² In the philosophical novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (1883-1891), Nietzsche penned the now cloyingly popular proverb, "You must have chaos within you to give birth to a dancing star." That such an initially radical statement has become the marquee of countless posters, T-shirts and fansites speaks to the normalcy destruction has acquired with time.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Wetzels, 24.
- ¹⁵ Jetzer, 35.
- ¹⁶ Benson cited in Goggin & Squier; Goldstein, *BOMB*.
- ¹⁷ Nuit Banai, "Jane Benson: Ecosystems of Knowledge," << http://janebenson.net/press/mews_essay.html>>
- ¹⁸ Groys, 148.
- ¹⁹ Sandra Ban, "Jane Benson: Black & White," *ArtNews*, January 2007. Ban comments further that these eviscerated smoking jackets and scarves "[border] on disintegration."
- ²⁰ Benson cited in Goldstein.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Benson cited in Goldstein.
- ²³ *The Splits*, Abrons Art Center catalog.
- ²⁴ Benson cited in Goldstein.
- ²⁵ Matt Schickele cited in *The Splits*, Abrons Art Center.
- ²⁶ Hugo Ball cited in Groys, 150.
- ²⁷ Jane Benson, "Extended Play: TeWhenuaCentroChapineroCorona, 2013" << <http://janebenson.net/2013-extplay/index.html>>>
- ²⁸ The title of Sebald's novel may be drawn from the epigraph of the book, where he describes the eponymous rings as, "fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect."
- ²⁹ Benson collaborated with composer Matthew Schickele to create the score for *Song for Sebald*. The vocalists are Hai-Ting Chinn (mezzo soprano), Tomas Cruz (tenor) and Joe Chappel (bass-baritone).
- ³⁰ Jane Benson, "Song for Sebald, 2016" edited by Molly Murray, Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia << <http://janebenson.net/2017-songs/index.html>>>
- ³¹ Matthew Hart, "Jane Benson: PlayLand," << http://janebenson.net/press/playland_essay.html>>
- ³² *Ibid.*

³³ Jetzer, 39.

³⁴ Goldstein, *BOMB*.

³⁵ E Barnett, "Curator's Pick: Underbush," New Museum online, 2004.

³⁶ Elizabeth Schambelan, "New Views," *Artforum*, 2002.

³⁷ Banai, *Ecosystems of Knowledge*.