

# Beliefs about Experiencing and Destroying Art

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## Abstract

Based in current debates in aesthetics, we examined whether people's beliefs match philosophers' arguments that an original painting or carved sculpture possesses a privileged nature when compared with originals in other types of art. We tested whether participants believe the destruction of an original art piece has different consequences on the ability to experience that piece if the art is visual, literary, or musical (Experiment 1). In Experiment 2 we explored how different forms of destruction varied whether people believe an art piece still exists and the perceived quality of an experience with the piece. In summary, we demonstrated that people have a more lax view of how art can be experienced than is assumed by most philosophers, but share an intuition that the original form of a work of visual art has a unique nature.

**Keywords:** philosophy of art; ontology; concepts.

## Introduction

In November of 2013, the painting "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" by Francis Bacon sold for a reported \$142.4 million at auction. One may ask why would this single instance of a piece of art be valued so highly? In a practical sense, one could own a copy of the piece and be able to experience it without having to pay such a high price. Is the experience of this work in its original form so fundamentally different than experiencing it in any other way to justify its sale price? In this paper we explore this issue by combining discussion from both the philosophy of art literature as well as research from the psychology literature. In the following we first outline the philosophical approach to understanding the experience and nature of art. We then discuss the psychological research that speaks to this issue.

### Philosophical Issues in the Experience of Art

Ontology is the area of philosophy concerned with the fundamental nature of things, and kinds of things, asking centrally what makes a thing the thing that it is, and what distinguishes one *kind* of thing from another kind of thing. Within the subarea of philosophy known as aesthetics, questions about ontology are directed towards art objects (e.g., paintings, poems, plays, and works of music). A standard assumption in the ontology of art is that works of literature (e.g., poems, novels) and music are repeatable entities, while paintings and carved sculptures are not. (Goodman, 1976; Davies, 2006) That is, on this view, a novel may exist in multiple genuine instances, while a

painting is of necessity a singular thing. This view, as such, carries the implication that, so long as there are multiple extant instances, destroying any particular copy of a novel—even the original manuscript—does no harm to the work of literature itself, while destroying an original painting results in the non-existence of the work regardless of how many accurate replicas exist. This assumption generally rests on the view that the ontology of art is grounded in artistic practice: how we (both artists and audiences, experts and laymen) go about referring to, treating, distinguishing, interpreting, and evaluating works. In essence, on this view, paintings are singular things and novels allow for multiple genuine instances because this is how we treat them (Thomasson, 2005; Davies, 2004; Dodd, 2007; Hick, 2013).

Working from the assumption that any given painting is— if only as a matter of practice—a singular concrete object, a related question in aesthetics is, does one need to be in the physical presence of that painting in order to experience it? Although a widely-accepted view is that knowledge about an artwork's aesthetic properties cannot be transmitted by testimony or mere description of the work (Sibley, 1959, 1974; Tormey, 1973; Wollheim, 1980), there is less agreement about whether (or to what degree) one could experience a work from an accurate replica (as in a copy of Michelangelo's sculpture, *David*) or representation (as in a photograph of the *Mona Lisa*). Some (Lessing, 1965; Beardsley, 1983; Currie, 1991) suggest that if substitution of a replica for the original would not affect appreciation of the work—as, it is argued, would be the case if the copy looked exactly like the original—then the replica would indeed be a genuine instance of that work, just as each accurate copy of a novel is a genuine instance of that novel. In essence, on this view, we could experience a work just as well through a forgery. Others (Budd, 2003; Livingston, 2003) suggest that aesthetic surrogates—prints, photographs, etc.—may serve to offer greater or lesser degrees of access to the original as a matter of aesthetic experience and knowledge. Still others (Goodman, 1976; Eaton, 2001) at least seem to suggest that *only* direct experience of the original work will serve.

### Psychological Understanding of Art

What can the psychological literature contribute to these philosophical debates about the nature of art? Newman and Bloom (2012) explored elements related to this issue in research that measured people's valuations of original pieces of visual art. They found that people put a much

lower value on copies of art pieces, even if they are virtually identical to an original piece. Newman and Bloom explain their findings by the idea that value for works of art is determined by 1) the belief the art came about through a unique creative performance and 2) the level of contact the original piece had with the creator that would allow some element of the creator to be bestowed on the piece. In short, a famous creator creating an object in a unique instance is what makes the object valued. In this way, the valuation of a piece of art is likened to a process of artistic contagion.

The idea of original works having special status in some part because of how they came into being fits with a larger literature that demonstrates that people care about how something becomes a member of a category. People have strong prejudices against genetically modified foods which are believed to have become what they are through “unnatural” routes (Rozin et al., 2004; Tenbült, de Vries, Dreezens, & Martijn, 2005). Lab-made diamonds that are identical in chemical structure to naturally mined diamonds sell for much lower prices than their natural equivalents (Scott & Yelowitz, 2010). Even children will refuse identical copies of their own toys in preference to the originals (Hood & Bloom, 2008). All of these findings can be attributed to the idea that people put greater value on things that seem to be the essential, naturally occurring version of the item in question.

Newman and Bloom’s findings dovetail with the idea of visual artworks being singular instances and help provide some explanation of such work’s value. However, this idea of how value is attached should not differentiate literary and musical works from the visual arts. Just as Monet may have intensely interacted with an art work he was creating, so would Shakespeare have intensely interacted with an original manuscript or Beethoven with an original monograph of a score. From this contagion account we would expect an original literary or musical work produced by the hand of its creator to be as privileged as a painting or sculpture.

## Overview of Experiments

In the following, we tested laypeople’s beliefs about the nature of different art forms and what it means to experience those art forms. Specifically, we explored whether people act as if only visual art forms exist as singular genuine instances or whether people treat originals in literary and musical art forms as similarly privileged. To test this, we used a paradigm of describing pieces of art as having been destroyed. We then asked participants about their beliefs of whether, and the extent to which, that piece of art could still be experienced. We tested this across visual, literary, and musical forms of art. If participants conceived of visual art works as being identical only with their originals, then any destruction of the original work should presumably hamper the experience of the work as compared with other forms. If however, people do not see visual art as any different from other forms, then we would not expect to see such differences across art types.

In Experiment 1 we tested whether people believe that the original instance of an artwork is privileged, and what they believe is required for a piece of art to no longer exist such that others could not experience it. In Experiment 2 we further explore this issue by investigating more specifically what people believe would be the quality of experiencing a piece of art after steps had been taken to destroy the work. Through these two experiments we can gain a better idea of how people view art in relation to the questions of ontology asked within philosophy. Given the view that ontology depends upon artistic practice, with practice grounded in our conceptions of art, these matters are especially relevant to philosophical debate.

## Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we examined people’s beliefs about what measures would need to be taken to destroy a piece of art so that others could not experience it. Participants rated visual, literary, and musical art forms. If the ability to experience a work were tied more directly to experiencing the original piece for visual art than other forms, then people would be more likely to endorse destroying an original piece as the key to destroying the work itself for visual art.

### Methods

**Participants** Sixty-two participants recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk participated for payment.

**Materials** We selected seven artworks that represented varying types of art and would have some familiarity to a lay participant audience. Two works were visual art forms, namely a painting (Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*) and a sculpture (Michelangelo’s *David*). Three works were literary forms, including a novel (Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*), a play (William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*), and a poem (Dylan Thomas’s “Do not go gentle into that good night”). Two works were musical forms, including a classical music piece (George Frideric Handel’s *Messiah*) and a popular music piece (The Beatles’ “Hey Jude”). These works represent the divide between expectations of what might be believed to be true of visual art forms as opposed to literary and musical art forms, as well as introduce variability within a type of art form (e.g., including literary types that vary in their reproducibility without the written text). We additionally asked participants about an installation piece (*The Gates* by Christo and Jeanne-Claude) but do not discuss the data here because of the different nature of questions that had to be structured for this work.

For each work we developed a set of options that described how the piece could be destroyed that increased in the complexity involved in destroying the piece. Example descriptions can be seen in Table 1. The simplest level of destruction (Original) described destroying the original piece (e.g., painting, manuscript, sheet music). The next level (Physical Copies) described destroying the original plus any printed, painted, or sculpted copies of the original piece. The next level (Digital Copies) described destroying

Table 1: Destruction options from Experiment 1.

Method of Destruction	Visual art form	Literary art form
Original	You would need to destroy the original painting made by Da Vinci.	You would need to destroy the original manuscript written by Dickens.
Physical copies	You would need to destroy the original painting and all painted copies that have been made of the work.	You would need to destroy the original manuscript and all printed copies that have been made of the text.
Digital copies	You would need to destroy the original painting, all painted copies that have been made of the work, and all accurate photographs and video that have been taken of the piece.	You would need to destroy the original manuscript, all printed copies that have been made of the text, and all accurate electronic copies that have been made of the text.
Memories	You would need to destroy the original painting, all painted copies that have been made of the work, all accurate photographs and video that have been taken of the piece, and the memories of anyone who has memorized what the painting looks like.	You would need to destroy the original manuscript, all printed copies of the text, all accurate electronic copies that have been made of the text, and the memories of anyone who has memorized the text.

the original, all physical copies, as well as all photographs, videos, and electronic copies of the piece. Finally, the most thorough level of destruction (Memories) described destroying the original, all copies physical and digital, as well as the memories of anyone who had experienced the piece. These four options allow us to test progressively stricter conceptions of what is entailed in destroying a work of art, while covering the different ways in which a piece of art could be prevented from being experienced.

**Procedure** Participants began the experiment by reading a passage that asked them to imagine themselves as an evil villain who was attempting to destroy pieces of art so that no one could ever experience those works again. Participants then were presented with the name of a specific work and asked to imagine that they were attempting to destroy the piece “so that the work no longer existed, preventing anyone from having any new experience of it”. Following this description, participants were presented with a multiple-choice list from which they could select what steps they believed was entailed in destroying the work. The first four choice options described the four levels of Table 1. Three additional options were presented that allowed participants to choose that 1) there is no way to destroy the piece, 2) they do not know how one could destroy the piece, and 3) another option that allowed them to fill in their own idea of how to destroy the piece. These last three options were added to ensure that participants did not feel forced into choosing one of our four target options of interest.

Each work appeared on its own screen of the experiment. The order of art pieces was randomized for each participant. Participants rated all art forms. The multiple-choice options were presented in the order shown in Table 2. All participants completed the experiment at their own pace through the Qualtrics Survey Software environment.

## Results

We first explored our data to see what destruction options were most often chosen for the different art forms. Table 2

presents the percentage of participants who chose each option type in each form. As can be seen from the table, the most often chosen answer for each art type was the Memories option. To explore these data statistically, we utilized the Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) procedure, which allowed us to account for the repeated and correlated nature of our data. We explored responses to the four possible methods of destruction show in Table 1. We recoded our data to represent a binary response structure. Selection of a given method being sufficient for destruction was coded as a 1 (e.g., yes this method is sufficient) and not endorsing this method was coded as 0 (e.g., this method is not sufficient). As such, instead of each participant having one choice for an art piece, each participant was given a separate dummy coded response for each of the four destruction options for that art piece. We further grouped responses to the different art pieces into two groups: visual pieces (painting and sculpture) and nonvisual pieces (all other art forms). For the GEE analysis, we used a binary logistic link function to statistically model choice as a nested, repeated measures dependent variable, as a function of Destruction Option and Art Type. This structure will allow us to look at main effects of Destruction Option and Art Type, as well as the interaction between these two variables.

We found a main effect of Destruction Option ( $\chi^2(3)=60.7, p<.001$ ) and Art Type ( $\chi^2(1)=13.7, p<.001$ ), as well as a significant interaction,  $\chi^2(3)=13.3, p=.004$ . We explored the interaction through follow up pairwise comparisons using a sequential Bonferroni correction. The Original option was chosen more often in visual art pieces ( $M=.10$ ) than in nonvisual pieces ( $M=.03, p=.036$ ). There was no difference across art types in choice of the Printed option (visual:  $M=.07$ ; nonvisual:  $M=.06; p=.58$ ) and the Digital option (visual:  $M=.18$ ; nonvisual:  $M=.13; p=.29$ ). The Memory option was chosen more often in nonvisual pieces ( $M=.62$ ) than visual pieces ( $M=.51; p=.016$ ).

Table 2: Percentage of participants who chose each destruction option by art form in Experiment 1.

	Painting	Sculpture	Novel	Play	Poem	Classical Music	Popular Music
Original	9.7	11.3	4.8	1.6	4.8	1.6	0
Physical Copies	4.8	9.7	3.2	6.5	3.2	9.7	6.5
Digital Copies	16.1	19.4	14.5	12.9	12.9	14.5	11.3
Memories	54.8	46.8	62.9	58.1	64.5	58.1	64.5
No way to destroy	9.7	4.8	9.7	14.5	8.1	9.7	9.7
Don't know how to destroy	4.8	6.5	1.6	3.2	4.8	3.2	4.8
Other	0	1.6	3.2	3.2	1.6	3.2	3.2

## Discussion

Our results demonstrate that there is some assumed privileged nature for original pieces of visual art. This was evidenced by more frequent choices of the Original option in the visual art forms than others. More importantly, our results demonstrate that, in the minds of participants, destroying a piece of art is more complicated than just destroying the original work. First, a majority of participants are endorsing that to truly destroy any work of art, you must actually destroy the memories of people who have experienced it previously. Where this may not be surprising for a work that, like literature or music, may be *memorized*, the result for visual art is surprising, suggesting that people could believe that, at least to some extent, such a work can be experienced through mere testimony. This interestingly suggests an almost transitive quality to the experience of art: if you have experienced the *Mona Lisa* then you will be able to share your experience with others through recollections, thereby allowing others to experience that work. Interestingly, this also suggests that a piece of art may be seen to exist *beyond* its actual destruction as long as there are people who remember the piece. While this claim is extremely speculative, it deserves further exploration.

In Experiment 1 we did not specify what exactly we meant by experience and rather left that distinction to participants. Presumably, the actual experience of a piece of art can vary greatly in its quality. For example, seeing the actual *David* sculpture should be a higher quality experience of that piece than viewing a photo of the sculpture. Do people agree with this assumption? That is, do people think experiencing copies or transitive experiences of a piece of art are equally good experiences of the work as seeing the original piece? We explore these questions in Experiment 2.

## Experiment 2

In Experiment 2 we further explored people's perceptions of the experience of pieces of art and the privileged status of original works in different art forms. We examined two questions specifically. First, do people believe that a piece of art still exists in some sense after it has been destroyed as described in the destruction methods of Experiment 1? If people believe that art is truly a transitive experience, then

they may be willing to endorse pieces of art as still existing despite being described as destroyed as long as they still exist in someone's memories. Second, do people differentiate the quality of an experience of a piece of art depending on whether they are interacting with an original piece versus copies or another person's memories? If original pieces do play a unique role in our experiences of art, then we would expect ratings of the experience of a piece to decrease over our destruction manipulation.

## Methods

**Participants** Thirty-two participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk participated for payment.

**Materials and Procedure** In Experiment 2 we used the same art pieces and destruction options that were created for Experiment 1 to create our materials. Participants read passages that described each art piece from Experiment 1 and different ways that the piece had been destroyed, mapped onto the four options of Table 1. For each piece participants first read that the original artwork had been destroyed, but physical and digital copies still existed, as well as people's memories of the piece. After reading this description, participants answered yes or no to the question "Would you say this piece of art still exists?". Following the existence question, participants were then asked to rate "to what extent could you experience this piece of art" on a 0 (It is not at all possible for you to experience this piece of art) to 100 (You would be able to fully experience this piece as if you were looking at it yourself) scale.<sup>1</sup> After making these two ratings, participants moved on to a new screen that asked them to imagine they now learned that not only was the original painting destroyed, but so were all physical copies, but not digital copies or memories. Participants again made the existence and experience ratings. This procedure was repeated with the level of destruction further increased in each description (original, physical, and digital copies destroyed, and then original, physical copies, digital copies, and memories destroyed). As such, participants judged the existence of a piece and the ability to experience the piece after increasing levels of destruction.

<sup>1</sup> The wording for these anchors was adjusted by art form type.

Table 3: Percentage of participants who endorsed the art form as existing and mean experience ratings in Experiment 2.

	Original		Physical Copies		Digital Copies		Memories	
	%	<i>M (SD)</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>
Painting	62.5	73.8 (29.6)	59.4	57.8 (31.0)	34.4	23.6 (27.2)	15.6	9.44 (25.0)
Sculpture	53.1	67.5 (28.9)	56.3	56.6 (26.3)	37.5	21.3 (20.9)	15.6	9.41 (21.0)
Novel	96.9	91.1 (16.1)	90.6	81.5 (26.2)	34.4	28.1 (26.4)	15.6	6.97 (15.6)
Play	100	92.8 (13.7)	90.6	82.6 (24.5)	43.8	35.8 (34.8)	15.6	12.6 (28.1)
Poem	100	93.0 (14.1)	90.6	83.7 (21.4)	56.3	42.0 (34.1)	12.5	8.38 (20.5)
Classical Music	96.9	87.7 (19.7)	87.5	84.3 (22.5)	43.8	31.6 (26.6)	12.5	6.97 (16.3)
Popular Music	100	92.8 (14.3)	100	88.8 (16.7)	56.3	36.7 (31.0)	15.6	9.03 (22.0)

The presentation order of the art forms was randomized for each participant. Participants completed ratings for all art forms. The experiment was self-paced and administered through the Qualtrics Survey Software.

## Results and Discussion

**Existence of an Art Piece** Our first question of interest is whether participants were endorsing that the different art forms existed after being destroyed by the different methods we described. Table 3 presents the percentage of participants who believed a work existed at each level of destruction. While for the non-visual art pieces, nearly 100% of the subjects reported the work still existed after the destruction of the original work, a much lower percentage endorsed a visual piece as still existing. The binary nature of participant data allowed us to use the same GEE analysis and follow up tests as in Experiment 1, allowing a test for a main effect of Art Type (visual vs. nonvisual) and Destruction Level, as well as the interaction of the two variables. We found a main effect of Destruction Level ( $\chi^2(3)=48.6, p<.001$ ) and Art Type ( $\chi^2(1)=16.3, p<.001$ ), as well as a significant interaction,  $\chi^2(3)=33.9, p<.001$ . Follow up comparisons found that when the original work was destroyed, visual art pieces ( $M=.58$ ) were significantly less likely to still be believed to exist than nonvisual pieces ( $M=.99, p<.001$ ). The same was true when printed copies (visual:  $M=.58$ ; nonvisual:  $M=.92$ ;  $p<.001$ ) and digital copies (visual:  $M=.36$ ; nonvisual:  $M=.47$ ;  $p=.042$ ) were destroyed. Visual ( $M=.16$ ) and nonvisual pieces ( $M=.14$ ) were equally likely to be believed to still exist when memories of the pieces were destroyed,  $p=.69$ .

In short, these results suggest as in Experiment 1 that participants have different expectations for visual and nonvisual pieces of art of what can destroy that piece. Interestingly, roughly 16% of people believed most pieces of art still existed if they were removed from people's memories. Who responded this way depended on the art piece, in that only one participant said that every art piece still existed when memories of the piece were destroyed. In other words, a small percentage of people believed that art pieces still existed after memories of the pieces were destroyed, but those people varied by art piece.

**Experience of an Art Piece** Next, we examined whether participants felt that the quality of experiencing a piece of art decreased as the level of destruction increased. To examine this, we again conducted a GEE analysis. Instead of conducting this over binary responses, we conducted the analysis over the continuous experience ratings as nested, repeated dependent variables. We used an identity link function and included Art Type and Destruction Level as within subjects factors in the model. We found a main effect of Destruction Level ( $\chi^2(3)=219.93, p<.001$ ) and Art Type ( $\chi^2(1)=19.47, p<.001$ ), as well as a significant interaction,  $\chi^2(3)=37.07, p<.001$ . We used follow up comparisons with sequential Bonferroni correction to explore the interaction. As can be seen in Table 3, the ability to experience a piece of art decreases as more thorough levels of destruction are inflicted on the piece. This trend was supported by our follow up comparisons. For both visual and nonvisual pieces of art, the ability for someone to experience a piece was greatest when only the original was destroyed, followed by the printed copies, followed by the digital copies, and finally followed by memories. The differences between each level for both art types were all significant, all  $ps<.001$ .

Next, we compared the ability to experience a piece at each level of destruction across visual and nonvisual art types. We found that when the original work was destroyed, visual art pieces ( $M=70.6$ ) were significantly less likely to be perceived as being able to be experienced than nonvisual pieces ( $M=91.5, p<.001$ ). The same was true when printed copies (visual:  $M=57.2$ ; nonvisual:  $M=84.2$ ;  $p<.001$ ) and digital copies (visual:  $M=22.4$ ; nonvisual:  $M=34.8$ ;  $p=.001$ ) were destroyed. Visual ( $M=9.42$ ) and nonvisual pieces ( $M=8.79$ ) were equally able to be experienced when memories of the pieces were destroyed,  $p=.79$ .

## General Discussion

In two experiments, we demonstrated that the way people believe pieces of art to exist in the world has interesting parallels and departures from philosophical theory. In Experiment 1 we demonstrated that people have a much higher tolerance for the idea that people can experience art indirectly than is contended by many philosophers. Across Experiment 1 and 2 we found that the original work in

visual pieces of art do seem to hold a privileged status. For example, in Experiment 2 a much lower percentage of people were willing to say that a painting or sculpture still existed when its original form was destroyed than a literary or musical work. This finding seems to suggest that laypeople see literary and musical works as having multiple genuine instances. However, it should be pointed out that more than half of the participants in Experiment 2 were still willing to say the *Mona Lisa* existed after the destruction of the original piece. For philosophers, this is an especially significant outcome. If ontology of art is in fact grounded in artistic practice, and laypeople conceive of presumptively singular works like paintings and carved sculptures as surviving the destruction of their originals, then such a view either needs to be accounted for in our best ontological theories, or else somehow explained away.

What do our results suggest for people's conceptions of the art domain? For one, our results suggest that the idea of creator contagion postulated by Newman and Bloom (2012) is not sufficient to bestow special status on an original piece of art. We have demonstrated that literary and musical works that should have the same hands-on interaction with their creators are not equally special in how they can be destroyed or experienced. While this contagion mechanism still seems an important element of the value of original pieces of art, a more complete picture must account for differences we found across art forms.

Second, we seem to have evidence that individual pieces of art exist beyond their physical structure. While this may be easier to understand for a poem that could be memorized and recited, it is harder to imagine what it means for a painting to still exist when its physical form and visual representations of that form are destroyed. People may believe a famous artwork becomes a type of public shared experience allowing it to persist outside its physical form. It is an interesting avenue for future research to test whether non-famous artworks have this same status (does a child's drawing still exist after it is eaten by the family dog?).

Questions concerning art's existence have interesting implications for thinking about our representations of other domains. What could make works of art exist past their physical destruction is that these works are recognized as special members of categories. For example, in the category of paintings, the *Mona Lisa* is a recognized special member. Does this mean that in any type of category, recognizing a given member gives it some type of special status? For example, Shamu is a recognized special example of the category orca. Does this mean that people think Shamu still exists even after her death? It is an interesting question for categorization research to investigate how special members of categories function within their categories.

In conclusion, we provide a first look at how different art forms are viewed by laypeople in relation to their existence and how they are experienced. While our investigation does not answer the philosophical debate about the nature of different kinds of artworks, it does inform the reality of the experience of art for everyday people.

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