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Pensioner attacks famous work of art

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8 January, 2006

THE ARTICLE

Pensioner attacks famous work of art

An unrepentant 77-year-old art activist has been arrested in Paris for taking a hammer to one of modern art's most celebrated pieces. Pierre Pinoncelli smashed several holes in Marcel Duchamp's white porcelain urinal, titled *Fountain*. The US\$3 million art piece was on display at an avant-garde art exhibition in the French capital. The opinionated pensioner has a history of sabotaging the altered toilet. In 1993 he relieved himself in it before trying to deface it and reduce it to smithereens. Pinoncelli stated that by urinating over the work of art, it had reverted to its former state of a toilet and was therefore no longer art. He described his assault as a "charitable act" rather than an act of vandalism. He said: "Its existence was broken.... Better to put an end to it with a few blows from a hammer."

Museum staff said the 1917 work was "not irreparably damaged" and could be restored to its former glory. *Fountain* was recently voted the most influential modern art work of all time by 500 leading art experts, beating Picasso's *Guernica* and Andy Warhol's prints of Marilyn Monroe. Duchamp shocked the art world when he submitted the upside-down urinal at an exhibition of contemporary art in New York. He signed it 'R. Mutt' a pseudonym that was also a pun on the German word for poverty – *armut*. At the time, critics scorned the piece and rejected it as an example of bad taste. Regardless, Duchamp went on to become a leading figure in the modern art world and was a proponent of elevating everyday things into objects for admiration and contemplation.

WARM-UPS

1. TOILETS: Talk to as many other students as you can to find out what they know about toilets. After you have talked to lots of students, sit down with your partner(s) and share your information. Tell each other what you thought was interesting or surprising. What more would you like to know? Are toilets beautiful?

2. ACTIVISM: A 77-year-old art activist attacked a work of art because of his beliefs. In pairs / groups, talk about why he might hate art enough to want to risk prison for destroying it. Discuss why people might become activists against the following:

- Modern art
- Postcards
- Computers
- Learning another language
- The word "hi"
- Jeans
- George W. Bush
- Your choice _____

3. ART: What kind of art is your cup of tea? Are you interested in modern art? Do you paint? Do you have any paintings on your wall? What is art / modern art?

Look at this list and decide which of these pieces of modern art is art:

- a. A pile of house bricks arranged in a rectangular shape
- b. Different colored photographs of a can of soup
- c. Foul language painted on a vase
- d. Splashes and lines of color made by a chimpanzee
- e. A dead cow cut in half and preserved in a transparent plastic case
- f. An empty room in which the ceiling light turns on and off at random intervals
- g. A cartoon comic strip
- h. An all black painting

4. ART OPINIONS: Do you agree with these opinions on art? Discuss them with your partner(s).

- a. Modern art is not real art.
- b. An upside down toilet is not a work of art.
- c. Art isn't important.
- d. Art is only for rich people.
- e. Children should spend much more time at school painting.
- f. Everyone is an artist.
- g. You need to be crazy to become an artist.
- h. Real art is paintings by Renoir and Picasso.

5. MODERN ART: Spend one minute writing down all of the different words you associate with modern art. Share your words with your partner(s) and talk about them. Together, put the words into different categories.

BEFORE READING / LISTENING

1. TRUE / FALSE: Look at the article's headline and guess whether these sentences are true (T) or false (F):

- a. A pensioner is highly apologetic for attacking a famous work of art. T / F
- b. The work of art was an upside-down white porcelain urinal. T / F
- c. The pensioner has a history of sabotaging art works. T / F
- d. The elderly man said he vandalized the work to test his new hammer. T / F
- e. Art lovers are devastated that the work suffered irreparable damage. T / F
- f. Picasso's *Guernica* was voted most influential modern art work ever. T / F
- g. 'R. Mutt' was one pseudonym used by a famous artist. T / F
- h. The artist wanted to transform everyday things into works of art. T / F

2. SYNONYM MATCH: Match the following synonyms from the article:

- | | |
|------------------|--------------|
| a. unrepentant | disfigure |
| b. urinal | advocate |
| c. sabotaging | defiant |
| d. deface | alias |
| e. reverted | latrine |
| f. glory | reflection |
| g. pseudonym | returned |
| h. scorned | magnificence |
| i. proponent | vandalizing |
| j. contemplation | derided |

3. PHRASE MATCH: Match the following phrases from the article (sometimes more than one combination is possible):

- | | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| a. taking | damaged |
| b. The opinionated pensioner has a history | few blows from a hammer |
| c. In 1993 he relieved | it as an example of bad taste |
| d. reduce it | of sabotaging the altered toilet |
| e. put an end to it with a | on the German word for poverty |
| f. not irreparably | and contemplation |
| g. restored | to smithereens |
| h. a pseudonym that was also a pun | himself in it |
| i. critics scorned the piece and rejected | a hammer to... |
| j. objects for admiration | to its former glory |

WHILE READING / LISTENING

GAP FILL: Put the words in the column on the right into the gaps in the text.

Pensioner attacks famous work of art

An unrepentant 77-year-old art _____ has been arrested in Paris for taking a hammer to one of modern art's most celebrated pieces. Pierre Pinoncelli smashed several holes in Marcel Duchamp's white _____ urinal, titled *Fountain*. The US\$3 million art piece was on _____ at an avant-garde art exhibition in the French capital. The opinionated pensioner has a history of sabotaging the _____ toilet. In 1993 he relieved himself in it before trying to deface it and _____ it to smithereens. Pinoncelli stated that by urinating over the work of art, it had reverted to its former _____ of a toilet and was therefore no longer art. He described his _____ as a "charitable act" rather than an act of _____. He said: "Its existence was broken.... Better to put an end to it with a few blows from a hammer."

Museum staff said the 1917 _____ was "not irreparably damaged" and could be restored to its former glory. *Fountain* was recently voted the most _____ modern art work of all time by 500 _____ art experts, beating Picasso's *Guernica* and Andy Warhol's prints of Marilyn Monroe. Duchamp shocked the art world when he _____ the upside-down urinal at an exhibition of contemporary art in New York. He signed it 'R. Mutt' a _____ that was also a pun on the German word for poverty – *armut*. At the time, critics _____ the piece and rejected it as an example of bad taste. Regardless, Duchamp went on to become a leading figure in the modern art world and was a _____ of elevating everyday things into _____ for admiration and contemplation.

reduce
porcelain
altered
assault
activist
vandalism
display
state
pseudonym
influential
objects
submitted
work
proponent
leading
scorned

LISTENING

Listen and fill in the spaces.

Pensioner attacks famous work of art

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AFTER READING / LISTENING

1. WORD SEARCH: Look in your dictionaries / computer to find collocates, other meanings, information, synonyms ... for the words 'modern' and 'art'.

- Share your findings with your partners.
- Make questions using the words you found.
- Ask your partner / group your questions.

2. ARTICLE QUESTIONS: Look back at the article and write down some questions you would like to ask the class about the text.

- Share your questions with other classmates / groups.
- Ask your partner / group your questions.

3. GAP FILL: In pairs / groups, compare your answers to this exercise. Check your answers. Talk about the words from the activity. Were they new, interesting, worth learning...?

4. VOCABULARY: Circle any words you do not understand. In groups, pool unknown words and use dictionaries to find their meanings.

5. STUDENT "MODERN ART" SURVEY: In pairs / groups, write down questions about modern art.

- Ask other classmates your questions and note down their answers.
- Go back to your original partner / group and compare your findings.
- Make mini-presentations to other groups on your findings.

6. TEST EACH OTHER: Look at the words below. With your partner, try to recall exactly how these were used in the text:

- | | |
|---------------|---------------|
| • unrepentant | • former |
| • porcelain | • of all time |
| • avant-garde | • upside-down |
| • relieved | • pun |
| • reverted | • taste |
| • blows | • elevating |

DISCUSSION

STUDENT A's QUESTIONS (Do not show these to student B)

- a. Did the headline make you want to read the article?
- b. Do you like modern art?
- c. What do you think of the idea of an upside-down toilet being worth three million dollars?
- d. Do you prefer modern art of older art?
- e. What do you think of the art produced by people from your country?
- f. What punishment do you think Pierre should receive?
- g. Do you think Pierre is also a modern artist in trying to turn *Fountain* back into a real toilet?
- h. If you bought *Fountain*, where in your house would you put it?
- i. Do you think Pierre is a hero or a villain?
- j. Why do you think an upside-down toilet was voted more important than a Picasso painting?

STUDENT B's QUESTIONS (Do not show these to student A)

- a. Did you like reading this article?
- b. What do you think about what you read?
- c. What adjectives would you use to describe Pierre?
- d. What aspects of our lives would you like to protest about?
- e. Have you ever taken part in any form of activism?
- f. What do you think Duchamp was trying to say when he created *Fountain*?
- g. Do you think everyday things can be elevated into works of art?
- h. Do you think the world has gone crazy when people pay huge sums of money for old toilets while people in Africa starve?
- i. What is the most ridiculous piece of art you've ever seen?
- j. Did you like this discussion?

AFTER DISCUSSION: Join another partner / group and tell them what you talked about.

- a. What was the most interesting thing you heard?
- b. Was there a question you didn't like?
- c. Was there something you totally disagreed with?
- d. What did you like talking about?
- e. Which was the most difficult question?

SPEAKING

ROLE PLAY: What sentence should Pierre Pinoncelli receive for his vandalism? Team up with classmates who have been assigned the same role to develop your roles and discuss ideas and “strategies” before the role play begins. Introduce yourself to the other role players.

Role A – Xavier de Jude

You are a famous modern artist. You think *Fountain* is the greatest work of art of all time. No one has the right to destroy it. It brings pleasure to millions of art lovers. Pierre is a vandal. He should go to prison for five years and be banned from all of the world’s museums and galleries.

Role B – Pierre Pinoncelli

You think human values have become totally warped. You don’t understand how an old toilet can be valued at US\$3 million when people around the world are in poverty. You think people who pay to see *Fountain* are the criminals. They should give the money to charity. You are helping people see how crazy the world has become. You believe you are a hero.

Role C – Inspector Henri de la Chapelle-sur-Mer

You are a French policeman. You don’t care about whether the toilet is a work of art or an old piece of junk. Pierre committed a crime. He tried to destroy a highly valuable object. He should be fined and go to prison for his crime.

Role D – Jo Public

You think Pierre is a hero. You believe the art world is full of people trying to make a name for themselves by doing and saying silly things. Most modern art is child’s play. Real artists have talent. Turning a urinal upside down requires no talent. Pierre is a great man who wants to improve our world. He should get a prize.

After the role play, discuss whether you really believed what you were saying in your role. What punishment do you think Pierre should receive?

HOMEWORK

1. VOCABULARY EXTENSION: Choose several of the words from the text. Use a dictionary or Google's search field (or another search engine) to build up more associations / collocations of each word.

2. INTERNET: Search the Internet and find more information on Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. Share your findings with your class in the next lesson. Did you all find out similar things?

3. ART: Write an essay about art. Explain what it is, why it is important and how it affects our lives. Read your essay to your classmates in the next lesson. Did you all have similar ideas?

4. LETTER: Write a letter to Pierre Pinoncelli. Tell him what you think of his attempts to destroy the work of art. Ask him questions about his actions. Show your letter to your classmates in the next lesson. Did everyone have similar thoughts and questions?

ANSWERS

TRUE / FALSE:

- a. F b. T c. T d. F e. F f. F g. T h. T

SYNONYM MATCH:

- | | |
|------------------|--------------|
| a. unrepentant | defiant |
| b. urinal | latrine |
| c. sabotaging | vandalizing |
| d. deface | disfigure |
| e. reverted | returned |
| f. glory | magnificence |
| g. pseudonym | alias |
| h. scorned | derided |
| i. proponent | advocate |
| j. contemplation | reflection |

PHRASE MATCH:

- | | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| a. taking | a hammer to... |
| b. The opinionated pensioner has a history | of sabotaging the altered toilet |
| c. In 1993 he relieved | himself in it |
| d. reduce it | to smithereens |
| e. put an end to it with a | few blows from a hammer |
| f. not irreparably | damaged |
| g. restored | to its former glory |
| h. a pseudonym that was also a pun | on the German word for poverty |
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GAP FILL:

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Museum staff said the 1917 **work** was "not irreparably damaged" and could be restored to its former glory. *Fountain* was recently voted the most **influential** modern art work of all time by 500 **leading** art experts, beating Picasso's *Guernica* and Andy Warhol's prints of Marilyn Monroe. Duchamp shocked the art world when he **submitted** the upside-down urinal at an exhibition of contemporary art in New York. He signed it 'R. Mutt' a **pseudonym** that was also a pun on the German word for poverty – *armut*. At the time, critics **scorned** the piece and rejected it as an example of bad taste. Regardless, Duchamp went on to become a leading figure in the modern art world and was a **proponent** of elevating everyday things into **objects** for admiration and contemplation.