The Guernica in Banksy’s Paper Shredder

Even if the avant-garde believed otherwise, science progresses but art does not. The best proof of this is that we continue to confuse value with price. In fact, we have recently played witness to two artistic episodes featuring the driving force of contemporary aesthetics: money. First, because of what Picasso charged the Republic for painting Guernica. Then, when Banksy doubled the price of his Girl with Balloon by shredding it at an auction and proving that, like jeans, some paintings cost more in tatters than intact.

Two decades ago, the influential Rosalind Krauss published a book titled The Picasso Papers. Although her essay is an analysis of the Málaga native’s collages, Krauss starts with a premise: at the same time the monetary system was abandoning the gold standard, becoming an abstract convention itself, art—from one abstraction to the next—was breaking the connection between representation and its real-life referent. The last time that the Reina Sofía Museum republished Antonio Saura’s libel Contra el Guernica (Against Guernica), they requested a foreword from Félix de Azúa, who dedicated three pages to summarizing the conflicting interpretations among the mural’s experts. Thus, the bull could symbolize both Spain and fascism, brute force or Picasso himself, the protection of the weak or “raw sexual energy.”

Art’s rupture with reality and its connection to the economy has produced great profits for auction houses and great books for libraries. One such book was published by Lawrence Weschler, the editor of the New Yorker in 1999, one year after Krauss published hers. It is titled Boggs: A Comedy of Values and chronicles the escapades of Stephen Boggs, whose life’s work consisted of drawing banknotes and, above all, managing to use them as legal tender. Once he succeeded in doing so, he was fined by the United States Department of the Treasury. True to form, he wanted to pay the fine with money of his own creation. Boggs, who died a few months ago, loved to say that the phrase “In God We Trust” was added to the dollar right when the currency did away with the gold standard.

The true power of a modern-day creator—whether God or an artist—consists not in giving life to his work, but in taking it away. It’s relatively easy to paint a picture—museums are overflowing
with them—not everyone can destroy it. Not even half-destroying it in order to recreate it. That’s what Banksy—like a bank’s childhood name—did in a supreme act of speculation. The attacks that icons receive have always played a decisive role in their prestige. Iconoclasm is a form of fetishism. Ever since the bulletproof glass was removed, *Guernica* hasn’t been the same. That day, for better or worse, its price multiplied and some of its value was diminished. It became a *Picasso*.

By Javier Rodríguez Marcos, *El País*, October 10, 2018