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Making Art by Ruining Them

Ruinism as a Strategy

Ruining an artwork to create another is a viable strategy for producing creative works. It creates interesting conversations on what it means for an artwork to be ruined or why that would be the case. The strategy of ruinism steps away from this subjectivity by focusing on deliberating ruining the medium of artwork and using that specific deterioration as a centrepiece of the remade artwork.

The word “ruin” comes from the Latin “ruo”, signifying “to collapse” or “to fall down” [1], though now it refers specifically to physical objects being decayed, destroyed or disintegrated [2]. Although when used more liberally, many entities can become “ruined”, such as when an artist creates a mistake in their portrait. Similarly, what one artist may deem a mistake and therefore their art ruined, another may consider a mishap a blessing.

Ruinism does not destroy or ruin an artwork, much like how it does not declare whether an artwork is ruined or not. It simply looks at how an artwork’s medium should be used, physically ruins that medium to make it inherently go itself, and uses this “ruined” medium to produce an artwork.

A common trend in ruinism is its high impact on artworks within an entire art genre. Therefore, this paper is structured so that it first looks into a genre of which an artwork is a part of and elaborates on why this entire genre uses ruinism before delving deeper into a specific artwork.

Glitch art

In most cases of glitch art artworks, they use mediums with technological components. This is because glitches can only occur in technology. Therefore, glitch art takes up many mediums, such as video, digital pictures, music, and even video games. Glitch art that uses a technological medium uses ruinism because it relies on the technology to be faulty, decayed, or corrupted to create an art piece.

An instance of glitch art is Rosa Menkman’s series of corrupted pictures: *A Vernacular of File Formats* [3], seen in Figure 1.

Menkman had taken an image of her model and decided to try and put errors in the image file. She did this by compressing the image file with errors in hopes of corrupting the file and producing visual deterioration. This resulted in the images in Figure 1.

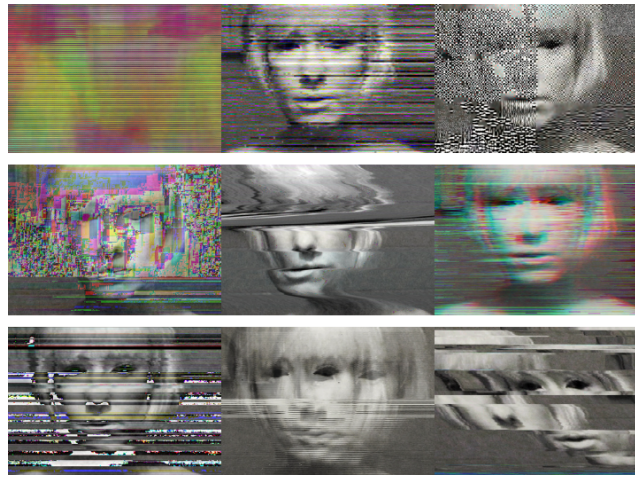


Figure 1: A Vernacular of File Formats by Rosa Menkman [3]

Her medium here is a virtual image file. She ruins this medium by deliberately corrupting the file. This ended in her final artwork, resulting in the act of ruining her image file. In her explanation of creating this piece, alongside her other glitched art words, she explains how “glitch design fulfills an average, imperfect stereotype” [3], enforcing this message of highlighting imperfections instead of hiding them.

Architectural ruins

Ruins have been seen as aesthetically pleasing to the eyes, dating back from the 1600s, although surging forth in the Romanticism movement. During this time, much criticism was set on classical arts and tried to broaden the arts from then [4].

Tied directly to the word, deliberate ruins use ruinism. In this case, ruins are referred to as the deterioration or decay of landscape or architecture due to them being a subject of time. In this case, ruins themselves are not considered as having used ruinism as there is no deliberation or conscious act on ruining the artwork.

However, when there are creations of purposefully deteriorated buildings, it uses ruinism. This statement still stands if the building intends to be a piece of decoration and nonfunctional. Therefore, folly ruins use ruinism. Follies are buildings primarily used for decoration and are not meant to be lived in [5].



Figure 2: Hagley Castle by Sanderson Miller [6]

Figure 2 shows a folly castle built in Hagley Park, England, in the 18th century by Miller. It was intended to look like a small ruined castle for a British baron [7]. It had been a trend to have decorative buildings, especially ruins, because the act of having ruins on their property had been viewed as very modern.

Ripped fashion

Levi Strauss & Co. created the first instance of ripped jeans in 1870. However, there has been a resurgence in the trend of ripped jeans, which is considered part of everyday life fashion in the 21st century. As ripped jeans returned to fashion, clothing with a similar aesthetic emerged, such as ripped shirts, jackets and shoes. See Figures 3 and 4 for instances of these clothes by clothing brands H&M and Zara, who have these items on sale as of 2023.



Figure 3: Ripped Mom Jeans from H&M [8]



Figure 4: Ripped shirt from Zara [9]

As such, it is interesting to note that all ripped clothing uses ruinism. This is because ripped clothing inherently goes against the goal of its medium, being clothing. Clothing's primary goal is to ensure the wearer is protected. Ripped clothing goes against the wearer being protected because it exposes parts of the body more. Therefore, ripped clothing goes against its medium for the sake of aesthetics and fashion.



Figure 5: Kim Kardashian's extreme jeans [10]

Kardashian's outfit highlights the new aesthetic appeal of ripped clothing. There is a difference in how the idea of "ripped" is taken into effect in jeans, the differences can be seen between Figures 3 and 5. Nevertheless, the use of ruinism stands as the jeans had their medium ruined to produce a fashion statement.

Untuned music

Many instruments must be tuned before being played. Proper instrument tuning determines that the player consistently plays the right notes to reproduce musical compositions. However, instruments can become out of tune with time and should be re-tuned. This is the case with pianos.

Playing musical compositions on an out-of-tune piano utilises ruinism because it relies on the piano as a medium to have deteriorated, and consequently deliberately looks for this deterioration to produce a new piano rendition. A famous out-of-tune piano rendition [11] is Toby Fox's *Fallen Down* composition for his video game *Undertale* [12].

The rendition of *Fallen Down* has been performed and uploaded onto YouTube many times. Viewers of these videos have claimed that the out-of-tune version of the piano piece was even better than the original, as it fits the piece's mood better. Furthermore, there is speculation that Toby Fox had intended to have *Fallen Down* be out-of-tune for the original piece, which follows through with how *Fallen Down* uses ruinism.

Counterexamples

Ruinism can be confused with various practices. This section will look into two different examples that may seem like they employ ruinism but, in actuality, do not.

The art of *Kintsugi* can easily be confused with using ruinism as a strategy. *Kintsugi* is a Japanese art form that repairs broken pottery by bonding the pieces together using valuable materials, such as gold (see Figure 6) [13]. The message behind this art is to honour and not forget breakage and to embrace imperfections.

While the message and goal align well with many themes of ruinism, it technically does not employ it. This is because *Kintsugi* uses pottery pieces that have been broken by accident. Therefore, the “ruin” factor behind this art is not deliberate and cannot be considered ruinism.



Figure 6: Example of Kintsugi by David Pire [13]

Glitch art was the first instance of ruinism that was elaborated on earlier. However, it was only considered as ruinism because the medium used to create the artwork can deliberately become glitched, as it is a technological medium. Therefore, graffiti glitch art on physical walls, such as the one in Figure 7, does not use ruinism. It is an imitation of the effect from a completely different medium.

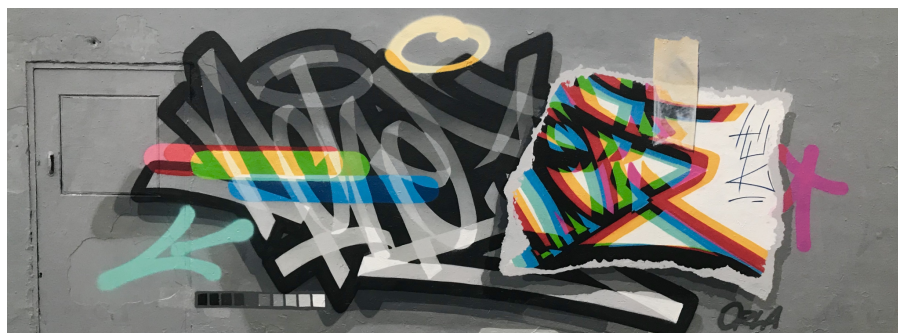


Figure 7: Graffiti glitch art by Aches

Using graffiti that uses ruinism as a strategy would result in a vastly different outcome. Demonstrating the effects of an expired spray can or using spray paint on a deteriorated wall would reflect more accurately what ruinism is through graffiti.

Insights

A few interesting themes can be noted to persist between all artworks that use ruinism. These include romanticism and accepting imperfections, both of which are related to one another but also conflict.

Romanticism, as mentioned when referring to the ruins, has a few characteristics that include appreciating the chaotic force of humanity, the beauties of nature, the deep focus of creativity, and much more [4]. However, a weakness of romanticism is its romanticisation nature, defined as “making something seem more appealing than it really is”. [2].

In all artworks discussed, glitch art, architectural ruins, ripped fashion and untuned music, they are all about romanticising the idea of the passage of time. This is mainly engrained in architectural ruins, and there is a clearer idea about what to romanticise, namely past civilisations.

Nevertheless¹, they are all looking past the impracticality of the “ruining” act if it had been produced naturally. With glitch art, the effects of a file being corrupted unintentionally are very frustrating, as is when buildings collapse, when clothing rips, or when instruments become untuned. Therefore, using ruinism as a strategy actively uses romanticism, as it makes a situation that should be frustrating aesthetically appealing.

However, this can be taken a step further. Ruinism employs the use of a ruined medium to create the artwork. As *Kintsugi* highlights, this can be viewed as a form of “accepting imperfections”. However, as ruinism is about the deliberate ruining of a medium and its romanticisation, it undervalues the “imperfection” mindset. Artworks are purposefully and deliberately set to be imperfect, which can be seen as perfecting the “imperfect” aesthetic, therefore undervaluing the message of acceptance.

Despite not being as impactful as *Kintsugi*, the message of imperfection acceptance is still to note. Ruinism also points out how mediums can be used in different ways, showing off characteristics that would otherwise not be seen. Furthermore, it also shows how people find imperfections aesthetically pleasing, and even if the “ruin” factor had been artificially created in ruinism, it might encourage the audience to accept imperfections more.

¹ This section is primarily from personal analysis.

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