

Cut Out

Francis Bacon's *Study for Man with Microphones* was completed in 1946 and exhibited twice that year. A black and white photograph reproduced in one of the exhibition catalogues is the only known image of the work in its original form. At some point in the next fifteen years Bacon reworked the composition. In 1962 it was exhibited in revised form as *Gorilla with Microphones*. Bacon, however, was clearly still unhappy with the painting. Only two years later it was listed as 'abandoned' – though not destroyed – in a 1964 catalogue raisonné of the artist's work.

Bacon found it difficult to stop working on his paintings, and his canvases often became so clogged with pigment that they had to be discarded. He also routinely destroyed works he was not pleased with. After his death in 1992, Bacon's London studio was discovered to contain almost one hundred slashed or destroyed canvases alongside thousands of books, photographs and other reference materials. *Gorilla with Microphones* was among the destroyed works, with two large sections cut from the centre of the canvas. Although the artist clearly intended to render the painting unviewable, what remains offers valuable insights into Bacon's approach to art. Tantalisingly, Bacon once described his destroyed works as among his best, admitting regret at their loss. Conceivably – although we will never be in a position to judge – *Study for Man with Microphones* may well have been among Bacon's most important early works.

Looking back over his career in 1971, Bacon claimed that his aim as an artist had been to paint 'a History of Europe in my lifetime'. *Figure in a Landscape* 1945 was the first work in his earliest series on this theme, a series that included *Study for Man with Microphones*. Completed in the closing months of the Second World War, and based on a photograph of his friend Eric Hall sitting in Hyde Park, Bacon painted a generic male figure, wearing a smart flannel suit and sitting casually astride a backwards-facing chair. But, disturbingly, much of the body is missing; his open mouth – a motif that obsessed the artist – lunges towards a railing, upon which are mounted devices suggestive of both the statesman's microphone, and the soldier's machine gun. In *Figure Study II* 1945–6 Bacon again focused on the figure of the public orator. Here the man's open mouth is clearly recognisable, while his self-importance – ludicrous given his ugliness and near nakedness – is emphasised by the umbrella and raised stage-like setting. The gaping mouth, umbrella and potted plants were elements carried over into *Study for Man with Microphones*, which was completed in 1947 and exhibited twice that year. Bacon was fascinated with the theme of the speech-making politician: his studio was filled with press photographs of Hitler and his Nazi henchmen Herman Goering and Joseph Goebbels, whose speeches before and during the war had created an indelible

memory in the minds of for Bacon's generation. In *Study for Man with Microphones* the male figure is clearly a public orator, caught seemingly mid-sentence. His white shirt and dark suit were standard dress for British politicians, while the black umbrella was associated with Neville Chamberlain, the pre-war British Prime Minister who often carried an umbrella (and in some cartoons was even represented as an umbrella). At the same time, the seated pose of the figure in *Study for Man with Microphones* may also have reflected Bacon's growing obsession with the masterful and chilling portrait of Pope Innocent X painted by Spanish artist Diego Velázquez in 1650.

Following on from *Study for Man with Microphones*, and further developing its imagery of the speaking politician, Bacon's first great series culminated in *Painting* of 1946. This work was quickly sold, and with the proceeds Bacon left London to live for a period in Monte Carlo. The picture's resale in 1948 to New York's Museum of Modern Art made it the first of Bacon's works to enter a museum, and it remains to this day one of his best known pieces. *Study for Man with Microphones*, however, did not enjoy this public reception. Unsold after its exhibitions in 1946, the painting was returned to the artist and remained in the artist's studio from 1946 to 1962, when it was exhibited at the Galleria d'Arte Galatea in Milan. However, the work was now dramatically altered. Although the microphones remained, the man seated under an umbrella had been replaced with the truncated torso of a nude; its back turned to the viewer, its head and face distorted. In the 1962 catalogue, the work also had a new title: *Gorilla with Microphones*.

Exactly when Bacon repainted *Study for Man with Microphones* is uncertain. Author of Bacon's 1964 catalogue raisonné, Ronald Alley, placed the revisions at around 1947–8 as the changes appear similar to works from that period. The new form of the painting seemed to reflect Bacon's revived interest in the male nude, which peaked around 1949, when he was introduced to the anatomical images of the nineteenth-century photographer Eadweard Muybridge. However, even with the new title 'Gorilla with Microphones', the link with political satire remained: there was an established tradition, in particular among the British press, of associating powerful political figures with monkeys or gorillas.

Yet Bacon was not happy with the changes he had made. Two years after the Milan exhibition, the work was listed in Alley's 1964 catalogue as 'abandoned', though crucially it was not classified among the destroyed works. After Bacon's death in 1992 his studio at 7 Reece Mews, Kensington – where he had worked for over thirty years – was found full of destroyed canvases. Portraits with faces cut out were piled on the floor. Larger lacerated works were stacked against the windows and walls. In some cases the damage had evidently been inflicted even while the paint was still wet. In others, the fracturing of the dry paint showed they had been cut long after completion. This was the case with *Gorilla with Microphones*, which had two large sections cut away from the centre of the canvas. These missing portions were found in the same room.

Although Bacon never spoke directly about the reworking and eventual destruction of this painting, he had long confessed that he had difficulty in resisting tinkering with a work if it remained in his studio. In 1962 he said, ‘I think I tend to destroy the better paintings ... I try and take them further, and they lose all their qualities.’ He also admitted in the same interview that once the process of reworking had started on a painting, it was almost doomed to fail, as even the slightest trace of paint on a canvas affected his ability to achieve the ‘accidental’ effect he saw as key to his greatest works: ‘How can I recreate an accident? It’s almost an impossible thing to do ... One tone, one piece of paint, that moves one thing into another completely changes the implications of the image.’

Bacon’s heir donated the contents of the artist’s studio, together with his papers, to the city gallery in Dublin, where Bacon had been born. The gallery arranged for these materials to be meticulously catalogued before recreating the studio, in exact detail, in Dublin. The curator has since claimed: ‘If Bacon woke up from the dead, he could go straight back to work in the room.’ Extensively reworked and then subsequently vandalised by the artist, what remains of *Study for Man with Microphones* is a tangible reminder that many artists destroy works as part of a sometimes pained and tortuous creative practice.

Text—
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