

無心之失

wu2 xin1 zhi1 shi1

Avant-garde artist Arthur Koepcke's 1965 art work *Reading-work-piece*, which depicts part of a crossword, is displayed at Nuremberg's Neues Museum. It features the phrase "insert words."

A tour group recently came to visit. One of its members took out a ballpoint pen and started filling words in the blank space.

The "vandal" was soon stopped by horrified staff. But what could you do when she was a 91-year-old woman who explained that she was just following instructions. It did say "insert words," didn't it?

The piece has an insurance value of 80,000 euros (HK\$694,200), and museum officials believe the work can be restored.

Museum chief Eva-Christina Kraus filed a criminal complaint nonetheless, saying the case had to be reported for insurance reasons though there was no malicious intent. "It's clear to us that the older lady didn't mean any harm," Kraus said. What the old lady has done can be called "無心之失" (wu2 xin1 zhi1 shi1).

Idiom by Lon Yan

"無" (wu2) is "without," "nil," "心" (xin1) "heart," "之" (zhi1) is "that," "this" and "失" (shi1) "a mistake," "a fault." "無心" (wu2 xin1) means "unwittingly," "without the desire or intention." Literally, "無心之失" (wu2 xin1 zhi1 shi1) is "a mistake made unwittingly," "a mistake made without intention," which is what the idiom means – "an unintended mistake," "a mistake made inadvertently."

The opposite of "無心" (wu2 xin1) is "有心" (you3 xin1) "with the intention of doing something," "on purpose," "deliberately." Damaging property intentionally is vandalism, like people who spray-paint graffiti on trains. Such conduct is criminal, and should be dealt with according to the law.

Terms containing the character "失" (shi1) include:

失望 (shi1 wang4) – disappointed

失敗 (shi1 bai4) – failure; to fail; to lose

失業 (shi1 ye4) – to be out of work

失眠 (shi1 mian2) – insomnia