

A Brief Moment of Monument:

Let's pretend that it is possible to take a certain moment in time, a particular Sunday afternoon in June 2020, and look at the world from above. What might be of interest to us is something like a shift in reality, an abrupt alteration of the regular urban setting in several distant spots. At this moment, for a split second, the rainbow flag in the sky over Kyiv is transforming an artefact of Soviet oppression into a symbol of freedom; in Richmond, a protester is writing with spray paint on the stone base of the Robert E. Lee Monument, thereby facilitating the point when inscriptions metaphorically appropriate the statue and become the monument in their own right; in Bristol meanwhile, the eloquent emptiness above the plinth on which the statue of Edward Colston once stood gives rise to a myriad of interpretations for this well-grounded absence.

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Iconoclasm in the Age of the Anthropocene¹

Whether it is Confederate monuments in the US, or imperialist monuments in Europe, we are facing a 'statue storm' owing to the Black Lives Matter movement. If we put the matter into perspective, it seems like this particular wave of iconoclasm started around 2015 with the Rhodes Must Fall campaign and the subsequent 'calls for the elimination of all symbols of colonialism' across South Africa, and later the UK, Germany, and Canada (Lowe, 2020: 10). Yet, not all acts of iconoclasm in recent years are part of the current reckoning with the world's colonial and imperial past; the demolition of ancient statues by IS in Syria and Iraq in the past decade, or the 2015 'decommunisation' laws in Ukraine are just some examples among many more. New iconoclastic outbursts around the world remind us of the fall of communist monuments after 1989 and the destruction of the tsarist monuments before that; of the *déboulonnage* of the Vendôme column during the Paris Commune in 1871; to a lesser extent they may also bring to mind watershed moments in the history of iconoclasm such as the 16th century Reformation, the destruction of religious images in the Byzantine Empire during the 8th and 9th centuries, or the pharaoh Akhenaten who, with his hymn poems written to the solar deity Aten, radically changed traditional forms of Egyptian religion in the middle of the 14th century BC. A renewed vision on commemorative monuments prompted by the most recent events encourages us to look at the history of assaults on statues in order to understand whether humanity is now bringing something new to the table.

In terms of power, there is of course a distinct difference between a Roman emperor attempting to erase his predecessor from the historical record and a group of protesters dismantling a bronze effigy of a despotic leader. Whether it is iconoclasm 'from above' or 'from below' (Gamboni, 1997), or whether this act is classified as 'ideological' or 'conventional' vandalism, or as 'tactical' or 'vindictive' (Cohen, 1984), in all cases, alienation from the original state of being is a common denominator.

In the debate of whether a particular case of destruction should be considered 'iconoclasm' or 'vandalism', it is curious how the 'reckoned presence or absence of a motive' (Gamboni, 1997) is chosen to be the leading argument. Simply put, if the act of defacement has a convincing meaning (for the public), then it is regarded as 'iconoclasm', if, on the other hand, the act is seemingly 'meaningless' and 'unfavourable', it always falls into the category of 'vandalism'. As Dario Gamboni (1997) put it:

Whereas the use of 'iconoclasm' and 'iconoclast' is compatible with neutrality and even – at least in the metaphorical sense – with approval, 'vandalism' and 'vandal' are always stigmatizing, and imply blindness, ignorance, stupidity, baseness or lack of taste.



Figure 1. Stalin statue. Budapest, Hungary, 1953. Photograph ©Fortepean, Gyula Nagy.



Figure 2. The demolished Stalin statue after the Hungarian Revolution. Budapest, Hungary, 1956. Photograph ©Fortepean, Pesti Srác.



Figure 3. Iconoclasts posing with Stalin's boots. Budapest, Hungary, 1956. Photograph ©Fortepan, Gyula Nagy.

The term vandalism was coined by priest Henri Jean-Baptiste Grégoire specifically to condemn the acts of destruction during the French Revolution. Therefore, since 1794 most subversive grass-root initiatives have been consistently labeled as 'purposeless', whilst the same actions regulated 'from above' have mostly been deemed reasonable and grounded. When it comes to the topic of destruction of art, there is often a certain bias as this action is rarely truly 'devoid of meaning'. We tend to believe that any modification to architectural structures in public space has a specific motive based on the personal appreciation of the 'surface' (whether it is appraisal or contempt). Therefore, defining the presence or absence of such motive and the subsequent classification of it as right or wrong frequently becomes an obstacle on the way to understanding the nature and creative potential of destructive acts.

I choose to follow the path of Dario Gamboni (1997) and to use the term iconoclasm regardless of a 'reckoned presence or absence of a motive'. As for the timeframe, this discourse departs from the hypothetical point in time when spray paint by and large replaced the penknife in the hand of those defacing monuments around the world.

It does not mean that iconoclasts abandoned traditional means such as the rope and hammer against the bronze of statues and limestone of pedestals. Yet, since the 1950s, new tools have been invented, and more importantly, the very idea of iconoclasm as an act of destruction shifted away from the concept of total *erasure* to *overwriting*. In other words, the act of creative transformation of commemorative structures appeared on the scene as a metaphorical form of iconoclasm. Amusing examples of this approach can be traced back to 1956 when, during the Hungarian Revolution, an enormous statue of Stalin in Budapest was dismantled by a crowd of protesters who cut the bronze likeness with a blowtorch right above the boots (Figures 1, 2, 3). Thus, while the broken pieces of Stalin were lying all over what was then 'Stalin Square', his boots remained on the pedestal glorifying the moment of the dictator's downfall.²

A massive wave of 'urban fallism' (Frank & Ristic, 2020) within the countries of the former Eastern Bloc followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Like most image breakers from centuries ago, the new iconoclasts just wanted to destroy the totems of the unwanted regime in their entirety, and the governments frequently facilitated the process. Generally, the large fragments of fallen communist monuments were transferred to the outskirts of cities. After a while, some of the places where they had been stored were turned into bizarre open-air sculpture museums. Yet, in the case of Lenin's statue in East Berlin, the iconoclastic initiative 'from above' (partly supported by the community) met with resistance from a group of locals acting in favour of its preservation. The granite monument became a battlefield which saw both sides apply all sorts of creative methods to it (from writing with spray paint, stencils, and paper signs to banners and projections). Soon, Lenin's effigy became a mere surface, the stone base for interchangeably applied qualities of *anti-monument* and *counter-monument* – everything but the symbol of power it originally used to convey. In the end, this monument was more than just demolished. Broken into 129 pieces, the fine red granite of Lenin's statue was buried in the forest on the outskirts of Berlin. Unlike many other fallen monuments scattered across wastelands, this one remained hidden literally under ground. In 2015, after twenty-four years, the head of the statue was excavated to be displayed at the Spandau Citadel, a fortress in Berlin turned into a museum. Yet, this reinstallation had an iconoclastic effect which is almost equal to demolition itself. The symbolism of the reemerged head of the prominent statue was transformed spatially, physically, and semantically through its *post-fallist* representation in the exhibition (Frank & Ristic, 2020). Seeing the giant head of the statue, detached from its body, unearthed, and destined to pathetically lay on its right cheek from that moment on, there was no doubt it could never again fill someone with awe. It had become a mere reminder of the fall of a monster (Lowe, 2020) rather than a commemoration of the rise of an icon.

There are many more examples of appropriations and interpretations of communist monuments. A variety of modified Lenins and defaced Stalins, 'speaking monuments' of Marx and Engels (Gamboni, 1997), a red-painted Dzerzhinsky in Warsaw or a pink Soviet tank in Prague – they were all meant to deal with the controversial heritage in the most accessible way.

SPRAY PAINT

As the iconoclasts' armoury expanded in the 1950s with tools that were never seen before, newfound methods lead to new forms of iconoclasm. In 1949, an American called Edward H. Seymour was the first to put paint in a spray can (Lewisohn, 2011). Surely, he could not have imagined the revolutionary potential of his invention. When it comes to unauthorised mark-making in public space, spray paint is less time consuming to use than a penknife, it is easier to hide than cans of paint and brushes, and its traces are more permanent than those of chalks. It therefore came as no surprise that aerosol paint quickly replaced the old iconoclastic tools. So, whereas Czechs used to change the names of the streets in Prague to disconcert the Russians as a guerilla action, youths in New York armed with marker pens and spray paint scrambled the signals of urbanity and dismantled the order of signs (Baudrillard, 1993: 80–81).

In the particular case of the famous defacement of the Soviet Army Monument in the Bulgarian capital Sofia in 2011, both the practical and symbolic qualities of spray paint enhanced the power of the iconoclastic act. The comparative effortlessness and efficiency of spray paint allowed the art collective known as Destructive Creation to repaint the soldiers on the pedestal in the city centre quickly and without being caught (Figures 4, 5). Symbolically, the fact that Soviet soldiers were repainted into characters from American pop culture with the use of a tool widely associated with American-born (and eventually highly commercialised) graffiti culture, is an eloquent emphasis on the sprayed message: 'abreast of the times'.



Figure 4. The Soviet Army Monument before defacement. Sofia, Bulgaria, 2010. Photograph ©Ferran Cornellà.



Figure 5. The Soviet Army Monument after the defacement by Destructive Creation. Sofia, Bulgaria, 2011. Photograph ©Ignat Ignev.



Figure 6. The Robert E. Lee monument covered in graffiti after the Black Lives Matter protests. Richmond, Virginia, USA, June 2020. Photograph ©Tom Iacuzio.

Solitary exclamations sprayed on commemorative public art do not surprise us anymore. In fact, such writings are generally ignored, much like the monuments themselves, which are of interest probably only to the birds. Yet, the 'textual' appropriation of the Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia, makes a great difference (Figure 6). During the protests that followed the May 2020 police killing of George Floyd, the stone base of the monument was entirely covered with sprayed messages. The slogans do not reach the actual statue of general Robert E. Lee, nor his horse, but the colourful *horror vacui* of the enormous stone base looks so solid that it seems like a new-born monument altogether, wreathed in names, quotes, prayers, and damnations. Phrases like 'I can't breathe', 'no justice no peace', 'we are one', 'fuck Trump', or 'uplift black voices' vigorously sprayed on a Confederate monument, emphasise this historical moment better than any new statue could do.

'We live in an era where people question the symbols of the past with increasing frequency' (Lowe, 2020), therefore it seems reasonable to preserve the history not as a sequence of erasures but rather as a set of overwritten values. In this case, the future generations at least will have a chance to come to terms with it in their own way, without us dictating for them what is right or wrong from the past. And whereas 'WC', written in chalk on the broken face of the Stalin statue vanished during the first rain shower in October 1956 – the word 'prick' sprayed in blue paint on the bronze of the Edward Colston statue stays there even after bathing in the waters of Bristol's harbour. Ready to face the whole range of interpretations in the future.

SKATEBOARDING

In 1956, the first mass-produced skateboard was introduced on the west coast of the US. Normally, surfing on the sidewalk and performing tricks and manoeuvres are not associated with iconoclasm, but, as we already learnt before, contemporary iconoclasm frequently deals with metaphorical appropriations instead of physical destruction. To treat a commemorative structure as a mere surface basically means to dissociate the stone object from its ideological function. Therefore, deliberate misuse of monuments by skateboarders could be considered as a process of decontextualisation.

Apparently, the semantical transformation seems less spectacular and demonstrative than the physical one. Iconoclasm by means of a skateboard is not often discussed in the media even though it is largely reflected in some artistic practices. French artist Raphaël Zarka captures on camera the moments when skateboarders are literally *riding* modern art. In this case, appropriation of public art proposes 'liberation from *cultural* memory as an arrested state' (Cotter, 2008). More recently, Ukrainian artist Vova Vorotniiov has taken this discourse to the next level. In his 'DECKommunismus' installation, skateboarders are manoeuvring on Soviet monuments, eventually depriving these relics of their bygone authority (Figure 7). Vorotniiov presents the process of skateboarding on Soviet monuments as a 'dance on the bones of totalitarian ideology' (Kalyta & Yakovenko, 2019), opposing formalised *decommunitisation* that often turns out to be nothing more than re-ideologisation in Soviet fashion.

LIGHT PROJECTIONS/MAPPING

Technological progress often determines radical changes in society. Emerging technologies challenge the usual order of things from the past and propose alternative perspectives on monuments which are useful for the creation of new cultural conditions toward the ultimate situation in which there will be no need for new memorials (Wodiczko, 2020).

Jenny Holzer is the first name that springs to mind when it comes to light projections in public space. The American artist started to use LED signs and monumental light projections back in the 1980s but some of her artworks seem even more relevant now than they were before.

The very idea of having a war memorial seems to be quite controversial. Such wartime values as national power, courage, perseverance, and military triumph (which are meant to be glorified by memorials) rarely prompt us to think about the opposite side and the consequences of war. Abuse, fear, violence, rape, and loss of human dignity are carved on every war memorial, victory column, or triumphal arc, yet these are unseen (and are consequently not discussed). In 1996, Holzer reversed the usual appearance of the Monument to the 1813 Battle of the Nations in Leipzig, Germany, by projecting excerpts of her 'Lustmord' poems onto it. She wrote these three poems to draw people's attention to the brutal acts of rape and murder of women in wartime (Lustmord is German for 'sexually inspired murder') and to propose to look at 'sex crimes' from the perspective of the victim, the perpetrator, and the observer. In the cold darkness of night, she illuminated the massive monument and its recognisable silhouette finally started to speak about the disasters of war.

On January 16, 2020, the statue of Admiral David Glasgow Farragut, 'Civil War hero, soldier, navigator, and survivor of stormy seas, hostile lands, and mortal battles' (Wodiczko, 2020) was reanimated and literally started to speak at Madison Square Park, New York. He spoke with the different voices of forced emigrants, adjusting to their experiences and appeal. Krzysztof Wodiczko, the artist behind the 'Monument' project, used projection-mapping technology to turn the silent and motionless object into a 'speaking and performative monument to refugees – unacknowledged civil war heroes' (Wodiczko, 2020). Hence, the speaking monument phenomenon discussed by Gamboni (1997) has reached new heights.



Figure 7. A drone on its way to the Motherland Monument, part of the ‘Mother Will Understand’ intervention by KyivPride. Kyiv, Ukraine, June 2020. Photograph ©KyivPride.

DRONES

There is a certain element of *detournement* in the way technologies invented for policing, surveillance, and military purposes are now being used against the system. As the domestic drone industry grows feverishly and multi-copters become more accessible, there is no longer any question as to the enormous potential of this technology for subversive acts on the streets (Michel, 2015). These developments offer new opportunities for grassroots initiatives to operate in the sky.

In this respect, it would be odd not to mention the artist KATSU with his graffiti drone. In 2015, his drone painting on a Calvin Klein billboard in New York City was described by *Wired* magazine as ‘an epic beginning of the Age of Drone Vandalism’ (Michel, 2015). Considering the recent presentation of his first for-sale smart painting drone, it is just a matter of time before some previously unreachable statues will be defaced literally from above.

However, painting is not the only iconoclastic ability of a drone. In response to post-lockdown restrictions, activists from the Ukrainian LGBT+ organisation KyivPride demonstrated an extremely poetical way of aerial iconoclasm (Figures 7, 8). On June 21, 2020, the meaning of the Soviet victory symbol known as the Motherland Monument was

alienated with flying colours, both literally and figuratively. For a short moment, the rainbow flag carried by a drone, rose above the Soviet statue, proudly waving from the sky.

The Motherland Monument has been standing in Kyiv since 1981. It was erected as one of many victory monuments across the Soviet Union, meant to be a symbol of power and confidence (Lowe, 2020). Like most of the Soviet war memorials, this one has a giant sword and a shield with the State Emblem of the USSR which makes understandable why someone in today's independent Ukraine might want to get rid of it, especially considering the fact that the country is at war with a direct successor. Probably, one can destroy the oppressive symbols, reuse 560 tonnes of steel residue, and replace it with national pride. But destruction does not liberate people from what they call the ‘past’. As a matter of fact, this is precisely the method that was practiced back in those days. To imitate the actions of the outdated system means to stay in its obsolete reality. In essence, it would not be much different from holding on to the past by building new Second World War memorials across the country (which happens in modern-day Russia after more than seventy-five years) in a pathetic attempt to revive the long-past deceitful glories and empire that is forever lost.³



Figure 8. The 'Mother Will Understand' intervention by KyivPride. Kyiv, Ukraine, June 2020. Photograph ©KyivPride.

Instead of the total erasure of symbols, one can approach the matter as a sculptor 'chipping off bits of textual or visual material in order to give shape to new semiotic patterns' (Caws & Delville, 2017). A new context and a latter-day approach exorcise the old demons from controversial monuments. No longer possessed by ideology, such monuments are just surfaces, 'a messy palimpsest on dirty vellum' (Kenarov, 2020) helping us to come to terms with the past.

The moment that a drone with a giant rainbow flag rose above the Soviet statue, the modern symbol of freedom overpowered the authority of the past. The threatening statement of the sword changed to a welcoming gesture toward the future. Even though the flag flew above the monument only for a few seconds, the moment became a point of no return. It marked the start of irreversible processes in society toward new cultural conditions. Such a deliberate attack on old meanings is worth more than any broken Lenin statue because it ruins the stone blocks in the psyches of millions, eventually becoming the most efficient form of iconoclasm.⁴

As time passes, monuments change, so does iconoclasm. Considering the rapid development of new technologies and enthusiasm of artists incorporating it in their art, it is not hard to imagine the future of monuments, for instance, in the digital realm. Jeff Koon's *Balloon Dog* in New York's Central Park, or KAWS's *Companion* floating over the Shibuya Crossing in Tokyo are just two examples of augmented reality sculptures which can be seen only in specific places through the use of an app. Augmented reality seems to be quite a good solution for monuments as they can be constructed in the most interpretive way, and will be easier to take down. People will have the possibility to make selfies with virtual monuments in the background, but the priceless thing about it would be that they are invisible to anyone who wishes not to see them. However, even by just imagining this digital scenario, I find it difficult not to think of hacking as an action of new iconoclasm inevitably waiting for our virtual monuments. Because, as time passes, society changes, and so do its values. And when the change comes, our monuments – and the values that they represent – remain frozen in time (Lowe, 2020). It is just a matter of time before someone would want to burn them down.

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- 1 The Anthropocene is a proposed geological epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems, including, but not limited to, climate change. The international and interdisciplinary Anthropocene Working Group considers the year 1950 as the starting point of this era (Carrington, 2016). The idea of significant human impact is used rather metaphorically in this text.
- 2 Naturally, it was the students who proposed 'Stalin Square' to be renamed 'Boots Square' and to retain the renewed monument as a permanent reminder of revolution. Unsurprisingly, the students' demand did not meet the government's approval and the boots eventually shared their owner's fate. In 2006, however, the sculptor Ákos Ele d made a life-size interpretation of the famously defaced statue and today, the pair of Stalin's empty boots – instead of Stalin's entire stature – welcomes visitors at the entrance of Budapest's Memento Park.
- 3 In his 2020 book *Prisoners of History*, Keith Lowe offers a broad analysis of Second World War monuments and the meanings they convey. He argues that the construction of enormous victory monuments (including the Motherland Monument in Kyiv) across the Soviet Union was a method of consolidation. Soviet people did not benefit economically in the aftermath of the Second World War, they were traumatised by loss and forced to face Stalinist repressions. The idea of 'national greatness' that was proposed by the state, could be the only consolation for the people. Victory monuments were meant to be 'the symbols of reassurance to the Soviet people'. Lowe tries to understand why Russian authorities keep building war memorials today, long after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of World War II. He comes up with two possible reasons: new war memorials are the answer to trauma caused by war (although he writes that 'it does not explain why the memorials are growing and replicating now more than ever'); or it is again about national greatness, about Russia that has lost an empire and has 'not yet found a new role for itself in the world. For many Russians, the building of war memorials serves as a reminder of the status their country once had, and perhaps also gives a sense of hope that, one day soon, Russia might rise again. The bigger the monument, the greater the sense of pride – and the greater the nostalgia. The glorification of the war has become a central pillar of Vladimir Putin's programme to forge a new sense of national identity.'
- 4 This is a reference to Joshua Yaffa's recent article in *The New Yorker* titled 'What the Removal of a K.G.B. Statue Can Teach America'. In it, he argues that the removal in Moscow in 1991 of the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky – 'who founded the first Soviet secret police which gave way to the N.K.V.D., which in turn, after World War II, morphed into the K.G.B., the notorious state within a state that embodied the Soviet system's fundamental illiberalism' – did not prevent Russia from being ruled by Vladimir Putin, 'a product of the very organs that Dzerzhinsky founded and came to symbolize'. Yaffa continues to point out that the removal of statues have little effect as long as it is not accompanied by a more complex approach: 'even as Dzerzhinsky's bronze likeness vanished, few bothered to talk about, let alone, process or exorcise, the Dzerzhinsky who continued to inhabit the psyches of millions'.

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