

Towards a Censorship from Below?

Current Controversies over Contentious Artworks and Monuments in East and West

For a long time, the freedom of art was taken for granted in the countries of the West. Art is allowed to make anything its subject, at least within the bounds of what is legally permissible, and to make use of all creative means—this, for the most part, has been the consensus in the art scene as well as in informed public opinion. In the wake of the avant-garde movements of modernism, various provocations and taboo-breaking were increasingly accepted as an integral aspect of art production and the art business. Indeed, they were often responses to public expectation.

Today, however, the freedom of art, and hence of artists, is increasingly being challenged in various parts of the world, including the liberal societies of the West. Again and again, works of art are denounced as ethically or politically intolerable and artists ostracized because of alleged misconduct. Shitstorms on social media, demands that pictures be excluded, exhibition cancellations, and removals of artworks proliferate.

At the same time, controversies over monuments in public space have increased in recent years. There have been countless attacks against monuments in various countries, statues have been knocked off their pedestals by protesting crowds or removed by official decree. For various groups of activists, stakeholders, and governments, a growing proportion of the monument heritage seems more and more unacceptable.

This article focuses on recent campaigns against contentious artworks and monuments in a historical and global perspective, citing case examples in Europe and North America.¹

Moral Claims Versus Freedom of Art

In recent years, disputes over controversial artworks have increased in both frequency and ferocity. One example of the radicalization of viewpoints was the protest against the exhibition of the painting *Open Casket* by US artist Dana Schutz at the 2017 Whitney Biennial in New York. The painting Schutz made in response to reports of police violence against African Americans shows the body of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy who was lynched by white men in Mississippi in 1955. Schutz used a photograph of the boy's mutilated body, which had been on

display in an open casket at his mother's request, as a template to galvanize the public. Similar to the famous photo, the painting was intended to be an indictment of the cruelty of racism.

But Schutz's good intentions were denied by her critics. They accused the successful artist of abusing the suffering of Black people for her own career. Artist and activist Parker Bright voiced this accusation in a protest action in which he posed in front of the painting, dressed in a T-shirt reading "Black Death Spectacle". It was a staging for the cell phone cameras of the museum public and immediately went viral on social media. "She has nothing to say to the Black community about Black trauma," was Bright's much-quoted message (Greenberger 2017: n. p.). In the ensuing debate, artist Hannah Black wrote an open letter categorically demanding the removal of the image from the exhibition. She even went a step further by making the "urgent recommendation" to destroy the painting in order to prevent it from entering the art market or a museum in the future. It was "not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun." And even if Schutz's intention was to express the shame of whites for their crimes against Blacks, she should not use their suffering as "raw material" for her art (Greenberger 2017: n. p.).

Parker and Black denied Schutz, as a white artist, the ability to empathize with the suffering of Black people. For this reason, they also wanted to deny her the right to express herself on the subject. Art critic Hanno Rauterberg points out that the consequences for the art world would be threatening if this logic were generally followed:

Everyone would be reduced to their origins, their gender, their skin color, and art would reinforce rather than broaden notions of personal identity. It would be an art permeated by new reservations, in which it would hardly seem possible anymore for a Christian to dare make a statement about the Muslim spiritual life, for a Turk to address Kurdish culture, or for an Israeli to voice anything about Palestinian suffering² (Rauterberg 2018: 29).

While in the case of Dana Schutz demands for the removal of a painting from the exhibition were in vain, the Leipzig painter Axel Krause was indeed disinvited from an exhibition for political reasons (Theile 2019). Krause was supposed to participate in the annual exhibition of a local artists' association in 2019, after a jury had included his paintings in their selection. However, some of his fellow artists protested against showing with him because Krause was close to the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and had been critical of Angela Merkel's refugee-friendly policies. As a result, the organizers excluded him from participation. This led to a quarrel, and at one point the entire exhibition was canceled. In the end, it did finally take place—but without Krause.

Whereas in the case of Dana Schutz the subject of her painting in connection with her skin color had caused offense among critics who accused her of cultural appropriation, the content of Axel Krause's paintings, which do not convey any explicitly political messages, played no role in the controversies surrounding his planned participation in the exhibition. It was solely a matter of the artist's political stance. Both cases show, however, that a long-standing principle, widespread in the Western art world, according to which a work of art can be viewed and judged without regard to the artist's person, is increasingly being challenged.

This development is particularly evident in approaches to works by artists accused of sexual misconduct. In 2018, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. caused a stir by canceling a long-planned retrospective of Chuck Close's oeuvre (Rauterberg 2018: 69–86). Women who had applied to the famous photorealist painter as models alleged that he had insulted them with sexist remarks. Close denied this and apologized in the event he might have unwittingly committed verbal misconduct, but this did not change the National Gallery's decision. As a result, Close became unacceptable as a person to other public institutions in the United States as well. The Seattle University Library immediately removed a self-portrait of his hanging in a foyer without any further debate. The librarian in charge explained that this was a "prudent and proactive course of action" out of concern for "potential student, faculty or staff reaction to seeing the self-portrait" (Riski 2018: n. p.).

Around the same time, Hamburg's Deichtorhallen canceled a planned exhibition by fashion photographer Bruce Weber after male models accused him of sexual harassment. The justification for the cancellation explicitly stated that the "separation of artist and work (. . .) was not given in the debate" (Rauterberg 2018: 72). In both cases, the accusations led to ostracism of the artist's person, which affected the reception of the work to the point that its presentation in public institutions was henceforth considered inappropriate.

Since then, the debates triggered by the #MeToo movement have led to an increased awareness of artists' sexual behavior, which includes the tendency to ban not only the denounced persons but also their works.

Campaigns Against Libertine Art in East and West

The disputes over art and sexual morality concern not only the conduct of artists of the present and recent past, but increasingly the content and forms of representation from earlier art periods, as well. In 2014, an open letter attracted attention demanding that Caravaggio's painting *Cupid as Victor* (around 1601) be removed from the permanent exhibition of the Berlin Gemäldegalerie (Ruthe 2014; Sternagst 2018). The famous artwork from the early seventeenth century, which shows the god of love as a naked, winged boy, was to be withdrawn from the public's gaze because the "unnaturally provocative position" of the child's body was "undoubtedly intended to excite the viewer" (Ruthe 2014).

The demand was made against the backdrop of the affair surrounding former Bundestag member Sebastian Edathy, who had been accused of the use of child pornography material. The letter was firmly rejected by the museum's management and derided as absurd in various commentaries. Nevertheless, initiatives to ban images suspected of having a negative effect on sexual morals have been mounting in various countries in recent years, and they are not without consequences for exhibition practice.

In the United States, a 2017 petition received considerable attention: art historian Mia Merrill, together with well over 10,000 supporters, demanded the removal of the painting *Thérèse Dreaming* by Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, known as Balthus, at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (Merrill 2017; Rauterberg 2018: 52–56) (Fig. 1). Merrill objected to the



1 A bone of contention as a case of “voyeurism and the objectification of children” since a campaign in 2017—Balthus’ painting *Thérèse Dreaming* at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, currently not on display

depiction of a young girl “in a sexually suggestive pose” by a painter suspected of pedophilic tendencies. She emphasized that she was not calling for the destruction of the painting, but she accused the museum of promoting “voyeurism and the objectification of children” by displaying it without any trigger warning. In her eyes, the picture was a danger from which the public needed to be protected. The museum rejected the claim in this case as well. However, in the meantime, the famous painting is no longer on display. An explanation for its removal is not provided by the museum to visitors.³

Interventions to restrict artistic freedom or the presentation of art for the sake of moral norms have a long tradition. What is new, however, is that they are now often demanded by the art public itself. By way of contrast, past interventions of this kind usually came from religious communities or reactionary forces—“powerful institutions that took action against art’s provocations, clerical circles that wanted to silence blasphemous statements, conservative parties that wanted to prohibit everything licentious,” as Hanno Rauterberg puts it (Rauterberg 2018: 15).

However, in various parts of the world today, censorship of this nature exerted by powerful institutions is still common practice, and may even occur in democratic countries. Especially in states with deeply conservative governments, curtailing artistic freedom can become an agenda for state action.

In Poland, for example, after the national conservative party Law and Justice (PiS) took over the government in 2015, interventions in art, music, and theater aiming at excluding works or performances denounced as offensive have become frequent (Wojciechowski 2017; Majmurek 2021). Particularly notorious was the removal of the photo series and video installation *Sztuka Konsumpcyjna* (Consumer Art) at the Warsaw National Museum in 2019, presumably prompted by the minister of culture’s intervention (Cieślak/Piwowar 2019; Hassel 2019; Magazyn 2019).

The 1972 work by Natalia Lach-Lachowicz, a pioneer of feminist art in Poland, depicts a young woman pleasurably sliding a banana into her mouth in an unmistakably erotic pose (Fig. 2). In this series of explicit images, one can see a connection between the sexual connotations and an ironic commentary on consumerist desire in a poor socialist economy. The minister

found this unacceptable for public display, as did the museum director he had appointed, who banished Lach-Lachowicz's series, as well as another video installation considered offensive, to the museum's depot. The reason the director gave was that the exhibition was also visited by many young people, who could be disturbed by such works. The trigger is said to have been a mother's complaint that her son had been traumatized by seeing the photo series and other revealing images. The "banana affair," as it was dubbed in the press, sparked protests in Poland's art scene, which included mockery of the prudishness of conservative guardians of virtue combined with fierce criticism of tendencies toward state censorship.

In its moral impetus, the museum director's action showed clear parallels to demands for the removal of the paintings of Caravaggio in Berlin or Balthus in New York. But the actors involved are quite different. If in Poland it was regressive forces that exerted power, in Western countries the efforts to restrict artistic freedom emanate predominantly from parts of civil society that tend to perceive themselves as enlightened and progressive. The type of political intervention is also different. In Warsaw's "banana affair," it is a traditional top-down pattern,



² Denounced as offensive and removed to the museum depot in 2019—the photo series *Sztuka Konsumpcyjna* (Consumer Art) by Natalia Lach-Lachowicz at the Warsaw National Museum

whereas in the Western cases, we witness the emergence of the “bottom-up censorship” phenomenon art critic Farah Nayeri describes in her recent book *Takedown. Art and Power in the Digital Age* (Nayeri 2022).

Decolonization of the Monument Heritage

Parallel developments can be observed in approaches to contentious monuments in public space. In recent years, social groups considered to be progressive bottom-up movements have campaigned in various countries for the removal of monuments associated with colonialism and racism.

Already before the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the subsequent protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, there had been high-impact campaigns by anti-colonialist and anti-racist initiatives against monuments in various parts of the world, such as South Africa and the United Kingdom. In the United States, the previous decade has seen several waves of remov-



3 The transformation of a monument to the Confederacy into a memorial to George Floyd—the Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia, before its dismantling, photo 2020



4 Staging a lynching: the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol, June 7, 2020

als of Confederate monuments and symbols in the South, which had fought to maintain slavery in the American Civil War of 1861–1865. In some cases, marches and racially motivated violence emanating from gatherings of right-wing extremists at the monuments provided the trigger. Finally, the outrage over Floyd’s death, who fell victim to an excess of police violence, led to a large number of monument removals. Over the course of 2020, nearly 100 Confederate monuments were dismantled (Barczak/Thompson 2021; Blokker 2021; Spiegel 2021; Treisman 2021; Walser Smith 2021, see also the chapter by W. Fitzhugh Brundage in this volume). Others followed later, after protracted deliberation processes. One of the most prominent monuments, the equestrian statue of General Robert E. Lee in Richmond, which had become a focal point of demonstrations against racism and white supremacy after Floyd’s death, was not taken down until September 2021 following a long legal battle (Fig. 3) (Ainio 2023). In addition to Confederate generals widely seen as explicit symbols of the oppression of African Americans, attacks have also been directed at various monument figures with a more multi-layered historical significance reduced in contemporary perception to crimes of colonialism and racism, including Christopher Columbus.

After Floyd’s death, there were also increased attacks on monuments in Europe, especially in countries that had played a significant role in colonialism. The destruction of the statue of entrepreneur and slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol attracted considerable publicity (Choksey 2020; Hobbs 2021; BBC News 2020). The activists involved staged the monument toppling as a lynching. They ripped the figure from its pedestal, kicked it, and smeared it with paint. They then rolled the symbolically desecrated and maltreated effigy of the slave trader to the harbor and tossed it into the water amid cheers (Fig. 4). The performative enactment of an execution was intended to invoke the fate of the numerous sick or weak African slaves thrown overboard during the transatlantic voyage to America—a symbolic act of revenge with features of an orgy of violence that took place in an exuberant party atmosphere.



5 “Tear down this shit”—the recommended approach to colonial monuments in Germany on an activist website, established in 2020

Along with Great Britain, Belgium was one of the countries in Europe that experienced spectacular attacks on the monuments associated with colonialism following Floyd’s murder. In Germany, too, initiatives for the decolonization of public space have gained new momentum in 2020. In many cities, they denounce the persistence of Germany’s colonial legacy on the streets and call for a critical debate. Sometimes, however, they propagate ideas apparently inspired by the demolition of the Colston statue. An example is the website *tearthisdown.com*, which was founded in 2020 by the artist collective *Peng!* in collaboration with activist groups. It called for reporting colonialist remnants in Germany’s public spaces and recommended under the motto



6 The founder of the German Empire in the focus of anti-colonialist activists—the statue of Otto von Bismarck in Hamburg-Altona, smeared with blood-red paint, photo 2020

“Tear down this shit” the following approach to the denounced monuments: “Off with the head, down from the pedestal, paint it, hang a sign on it—there are many possibilities. But marking it is not enough, we’re looking for other forms. A lot of things can be a monument, and when in doubt, floating it in the water will do” (<https://www.tearthisdown.com>) (Fig. 5). The website, which is currently no longer available, may have played a role in some of the subsequent attacks on monuments in Berlin, prompting prosecutorial investigations against members of the *Peng!* collective (see also Christiane Kruse’s chapter in this volume).

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, attacks on concrete monuments have increased not only in Berlin. Particularly affected is Hamburg, a city with a history closely linked to colonialism because of its overseas port (Zimmerer/Todzi 2021). In Hamburg, some removals of monuments honoring figures involved in colonialism had already occurred long before 2020. As early as 1967 and 1968, protesting students repeatedly toppled the statue of Hermann von Wissmann (1853–1905), an adventurer, explorer of Africa, military officer and colonial governor of German East Africa, from its pedestal. As a result, the city refrained from reinstalling the monument and placed it in storage. In 2008, after protests and damages, the bust of the entrepreneur, politician and slave trader Heinrich Carl von Schimmellmann (1724–1782), which had been installed only two years previously to honor his commitment to the city, was removed from the Wandsbek Market. After Floyd’s death, statues of Otto von Bismarck, the founder of the German Reich, whose role in colonialism has increasingly come into focus, were also the target of attacks. A Bismarck statue in Hamburg-Altona was smeared with blood-red paint (Fig. 6), similar to the Schimmellmann bust in Wandsbek before it was dismantled. Demonstrations were held at the Bismarck monument in the Alter Elbpark against the ongoing renovation, and several initiatives even demanded the demolition of the colossal statue.

Decommunization of the Monument Heritage

The symbolically loaded destruction of monuments is rooted in a tradition that might be as old as monument production itself (Hoffmann et al. 1992; Speitkamp 1997; Gamboni 2018; Parzinger 2021). In the past, statues fell from their pedestals mainly in times of political upheaval, such as the French Revolution (Tauber 2009), the aftermath of the two World Wars, or the fall of state socialism in Eastern Europe (Kramer 1992; Nationalkomitee der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1994; Saunders 2018). In various historical situations, monument demolition had the political function of demonstrating to the people a change of power, making it appear irreversible and thus consolidating it. The destruction of the symbols of a vanquished regime could also have military significance, especially if it was staged by mass media. Thus, the blowing up of the swastika on the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg on April 22, 1945, weeks before Germany surrendered, set a spectacular signal for the downfall of the Third Reich that clearly affected the further course of the fighting. And when pictures of the toppling statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad went around the world in April 2003, it sent an unmistakable and effective message to his remaining defenders that the regime stood no chance against the military superiority of the invading forces led by the United States.



7 De-Sovietization of public space in Ukraine—the toppling of a Lenin statue in Khmelnytsky, February 21, 2014

Falling monuments often accompany eruptions of acute political tensions. In Ukraine, the Euromaidan protests against the policies of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych beginning in December 2013 were accompanied by a mass destruction of Lenin monuments (Fig. 7), which a Ukrainian neologism dubbed “Leninopad” (Lenin Fall) (Rozenas/Vlasenko 2018; *The Future of Ukraine’s Past*). In its development and performative gestures, the Leninopad phenomenon shows clear parallels to the later monument overthrows in the course of the Black Lives Matter protests. For some of the population, the statues of the Russian revolutionary, large numbers of which had remained in Ukraine despite earlier waves of dismantling since the 1990s, were a bone of contention reminding them of their shared history with Russia in the Soviet Union and of Russia’s claim to power in Ukraine. After the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Leninopad reached its peak, with more than 300 monuments reported to have fallen within a few days. Initially carried out mainly in spontaneous actions as part of the protest movement, the removal of Lenin monuments later became an element of a legally defined, symbolic state policy that Ukraine adopted in reaction to Russian aggression, and occasionally received accusations that it contributed to an exclusive, nationalist politics of history (Tsyba 2017). In May 2015, Yanukovich’s successor Petro Poroshenko signed a set of laws addressing the decommunization of public space and ordering the removal of the remaining monuments to communism and other Soviet symbols. In total, more than 1,000 monuments to Lenin and other communist personages are reported to have been removed in Ukraine in the aftermath of the Euromaidan protests and the annexation of Crimea.

Since February 2022, Russia has been waging a full-fledged war of conquest against Ukraine, which is increasingly turning into a war of extermination. The extreme experience of violence to which Ukraine is currently exposed also affects the way it deals with the remaining remnants of the Soviet monument heritage. These include memorials commemorating World War II, which were exempt from the decommunization laws. Just a few days after the war began, a Soviet tank commemorating the city's liberation from German occupation in March 1945 was removed from its pedestal in Chernivtsi in southwestern Ukraine (Martens 2022). Since then, other cities have followed suit. De-Sovietization now goes hand in hand with a de-Russification of public space. In Kyiv, Mayor Vitali Klitschko let a prominent monument to Ukrainian-Russian friendship be demolished in April 2022, with great media attention, and announced the destruction of 60 other Soviet-era monuments (Häntzschel 2022). Since then, many more monuments commemorating ties with Russia have been dismantled in Ukraine, including statues of cultural figures such as Alexander Pushkin (Boy 2023).

From the beginning of the full-fledged war against Ukraine, there have been echoes of this reflex against any monuments associated with Russia in other countries as well, especially those that once belonged to the Soviet sphere of power and perceive Russian aggression as a threat to themselves as well, for example the Baltic States. At the same time, in the midst of the brutal war, a re-Russification of public space is taking place in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. In some cities, even Lenin's statues, which had been removed in the course of Leninopad in 2014–15, were reinstalled (Bregman 2022; Deschepper 2022; Fink 2022), demonstrating once more the importance attached to the politics of monuments in armed conflicts.

The dismantling of monuments is a recurring concomitant of power changes and acute conflict situations. It can be initiated by very different actors and pursue different political goals. In many historical situations, it can seem politically logical and sometimes even ethically necessary, such as (just to mention the most obvious example) the case of blowing up the swastika in Nuremberg, which, as a symbol of a murderous regime, was unacceptable in public space and had to be eliminated as a sign of its end. There are also sound ethical arguments for the removal of Confederate monuments, as they are perceived by a large part of the population as offensive symbols of oppression, especially when displayed in prominent public places without any critical commentary, as has usually been the case. Moreover, a mobilizing effect for racist movements is attributed to these images (see the chapter of W. Fitzhugh Brundage in this volume). Similarly, Ukrainians today deserve understanding if they find symbols of Russian domination unacceptable in the face of the acute war experience and the crimes committed by Russian soldiers. One may regret this for the sake of the monuments' historical and in some cases artistic value. But today, while their country is subjected daily to brutal attacks by Russia, it is certainly not the time to lecture Ukrainians in this regard.

Various motivations and ideological backgrounds can fuel the removal of contentious monuments, in particular political and emotional situations. Viewed in a historical perspective, however, systematically destroying monuments that fail to meet the political demands of the respective present seems to be a typical action pattern of dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. The Soviet Union destroyed not only czar monuments, but also countless churches that stood for the former power of Christianity. The Third Reich radically eliminated Jewish heritage



8 Saved from decommunization—the monument to Jerzy Ziętek in Katowice, photo 2023

as well as monuments commemorating political opponents. During World War II, German troops also destroyed numerous monuments in the occupied territories, most systematically in Poland, which the Nazi regime wanted to eradicate as a cultural nation. The GDR removed many monuments that did not fit the communist image of history, such as victory monuments and imperial statues from the time of the German Empire.

However, there are also tendencies in democratically constituted states toward a uniform historical policy that tolerates only monuments seen as ideologically appropriate. Poland, where the former national conservative government also pushed through a decommunization law in 2016, offers an example of this. The law, similar in essence to that of Ukraine and several other post-socialist countries, entails the mandatory removal of all remaining monuments to communism (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej; Derlacz 2018; Pastuszko 2018). It sparked controversies in which critics warned of a return to state censorship in the service of a totalitarian politics of memory—analogous to the trends in Poland’s art world described above.

The debates involved not least the question of how to deal with monuments of ambivalent historical figures who, in collective memory, can stand for communism but also for other aspects of history. One such case is the monument to the politician and military leader Jerzy Ziętek in the Upper Silesian regional capital of Katowice (Zasada 2018) (Fig. 8). Ziętek was a functionary of

the communist power apparatus in the People's Republic of Poland. However, he is revered in Upper Silesia for his service to the region and closeness to the people. According to the provisions of the decommunization law, the statue, erected as recently as 2005, had to be removed. However, the municipality of Katowice successfully resisted through an administrative measure by placing the monument's location under the jurisdiction of a museum, thus taking advantage of an exemption in the law that applies to museums.

Reflective Approaches to a Dissonant Monument Heritage in Germany

In post-1990 Germany, the treatment of monuments of the former GDR has caused much controversy (Hoffmann et al. 1992; Kramer 1992; Nationalkomitee 1994; Flierl 2007; Ziesemer 2019). There have been repeated accusations that the new authorities systematically destroyed the visual heritage of the GDR, dictated by pure ideological hatred against the legacy of the socialist German state. The gigantic Lenin statue in Berlin-Friedrichshain, which was demolished in 1991 after a decision by the responsible district assembly, was often cited as prominent evidence. In fact, numerous monuments from the GDR era, and particularly Lenin statues, did not survive the change of political system in East Germany.

However, there are also several examples of conspicuous GDR monuments that are still preserved, although they hardly align with the political ideals of the Federal Republic, and often not at all. These include, for example, a colossal monument of the communist party leader Ernst Thälmann in Berlin, whose removal has been repeatedly demanded in vain, most recently in 2022, as a somewhat bizarre reflex to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Hollersen 2022). An example of one astonishing career of a GDR monument after 1990 is offered by the monumental Karl Marx head in Chemnitz, which has since become very popular and is used by the city as a promotional icon (Bartetzky 2012: 210–220).

A closer look reveals a picture that contradicts the media perception focused on monument overthrows and spectacular political conflicts over heritage issues. The historian Nina Ziesemer concludes in her thorough dissertation on the treatment of the GDR heritage in Berlin that the preservation of the monuments and their integration into the Federal Republic's culture of remembrance was the rule rather than the exception (Ziesemer 2019). Ziesemer also demonstrates that, contrary to widespread belief, political influence on decisions has in most cases been limited. Instead, relatively unbiased experts from administrations often ensured the monuments' preservation without making any noise. The historian Kirsten Otto arrives at similar conclusions in her book about disappeared monuments in Berlin (Otto 2020).

In contrast with other post-socialist countries, a broad consensus has developed in Germany, at least among experts, in favor of the preservation of controversial, "discomforting" monuments (*unbequeme Denkmäler*). This seems to be the result of long-lasting intensive discourses in science and the media. In a large number of contributions, especially from the fields of heritage studies and art history, various aspects of the idea have been articulated that the dissonant monuments, which contradict today's prevailing world views and remind us of history's aberrations, should be saved—as a reminder to critically reflect on our own convictions and

to question the certainties of the present. In this spirit, the former head of Berlin's monument preservation authority, Helmut Engel, formulated the following maxim at a 1993 conference on how to handle the monuments of communism:

Preserving history while overcoming it means two things. First, it is improper to let progress go hand in hand with destruction. And it must be possible for the admonishing effect of history to question the one-dimensionality of progress. (. . .) Renunciation of destruction does not include a renunciation of change, but change can now only take place under the premise of supplementing the historical document, whereby the new joins the old in mutual respect (. . .). Thus, the revolution also forfeits the right to overthrow monuments and other witnesses to its hated predecessors (. . .) (Engel 1994: 16).

Such reflective approaches, which aim at preserving and critically contextualizing problematic monuments as historical evidence, seem particularly pronounced in Germany. This is probably the result of its experience with addressing the difficult legacy of two dictatorships in the twentieth century.

Differentiated positions such as these can only develop in liberal democracies. They are generally unwelcome in dictatorships. But they can also have a bad standing in democratically constituted states when illiberal politics of history prevail, or when monuments become targets of political campaigns and activist movements.

Blurring Boundaries between “Bottom-Up” and “Top-Down”

A comparative look at various campaigns to decolonize and decommunize public space reveals striking parallels. They are rooted in the lack of a sense for the ambivalence of certain historical processes or figures and for the diversity in the perception of monuments. Another common feature is the implicit belief in an almost magical power of monuments and their perceived ability to perpetuate political messages, ideologies, and social patterns of the past across all historical changes. From this perspective, the presence of monuments of communism, like the visual relics of colonialism, are seen as a threat to the political and moral condition of contemporary societies. This results in one-dimensional patterns of argumentation that admit only one's own perspective and deny the legitimacy of other approaches.

Similar to the initiatives against contentious works of art mentioned in the first part of this chapter, campaigns against controversial monuments are based on the view that society needs to be protected from harmful ideas and representations in the public sphere. Although attacks on monuments are understandable in emotionally charged situations and particularly following experiences of violence, they sometimes reveal tendencies to educate while intellectually incapacitating the public, which is deemed unequipped to form its own judgments when viewing works of art and historical relics.

In an analogy to recent attempts to restrict artistic freedom, the attacks against controversial monuments in different parts of the world evidence parallel mental patterns despite their

different constellations of actors. If the decommunization laws in Eastern Europe emanate predominantly from conservative-minded national governments, the decolonization campaigns in the countries of the West and in parts of Africa are based on anti-racist activism that is considered an emancipatory movement from below. Thus, in the first case, it seems to be a top-down policy imposed by illiberal forces in power, while the latter offers an example of bottom-up initiatives against the power establishment that seek to overcome a dominant discourse.

A closer look, however, reveals that this apparent contrast is relative. For one thing, decommunization is based not only on the intervention of those in power, but also on the sentiments and demands of at least part of the population. This is particularly evident in Ukraine, where the decommunization law was preceded by the spontaneous destruction of numerous monuments during demonstrations, and where Ukrainians today unleash their suffering from the war and anger over Russian aggression in actions against monuments. On the other hand, the decrease in the number of Confederate monuments in the United States is not only an effect of actions during Black Lives Matter protests, but also, and indeed mainly, a result of administrative acts on the part of local authorities and court decisions.

Moreover, the call for the removal of Confederate monuments enjoys widespread support in the United States, both in some political sectors and in professional communities. The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) published a declaration in 2020 that blanketly welcomed the immediate removal of these monuments from public spaces. "The removal of Confederate monuments is a necessary and important step (. . .), and one that cannot wait any longer," the statement reads (Society of Architectural Historians 2020). Implicitly, the declaration expresses an understanding for the material destruction of the monuments where the costs for professional removal and storage appear too high. The critically reflective, preservation-oriented approaches to problematic heritage that are so pronounced in Germany seem to be unfamiliar or irrelevant to the declaration's authors, at least in regard to Confederate monuments. At the same time, the SAH statement shows that activism directed against these monuments is now deeply embedded in established scholarship as well.

Not least, regarding this activism as an exclusively bottom-up movement fails to recognize the power of the social media. The mass impact of social media can help once-marginalized social groups and movements gain public visibility and influence over institutions in a way that makes traditional notions of "top" and "bottom" seem outdated (Nayeri 2022). However, this positive effect of empowerment has a highly problematic side. Social media's forms of communication promote simplifications of the argument and forge polarization. The level of excitement enhanced by social media in disputes over controversial works of art and monuments threatens something that is essential in approaching public space in liberal societies: the ability to tolerate and to critically reflect a diversity of representations and messages that do not conform to the political standards and moral claims of the present.

Notes

- 1 This paper is a modified and updated version of an article published recently in German language—Bartetzky, Arnold (2023), Zensur von unten? Aktuelle Auseinandersetzungen um umstrittene Kunstwerke und Denkmäler, in: Kahveci, Ayşegül Dinççağ, et al. (eds.), *Censored? Conflicted Concepts of Cultural Heritage*, Weimar, pp. 30–45. I thank Adriana Baranski, Bettina Haase, Engel Friederike Holst, Anja Höfer, Wolfram Höhne, Nicolas Karpf, Yuliya Komarynets, Karin Reichenbach, Gáspár Salamon, Kristina Sassenscheidt, Martin Schieder, and Halina Yatseniuk for valuable help and good advice.
- 2 English translations of this and the following quotes by the author.
- 3 Status as of August 2023, during the author's visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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