



**CONTESTED
HISTORIES**
Discussion Paper

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Abstract

Artistic intervention can be described as how artists transform existing statues to obscure historical representations and, to speak, as an intervention, against broader societal discourse. Thus, it has been a recurrent remedy for dealing with certain monuments' contestations, from confederate monuments to those of colonisers or linked to authoritarianism pasts. We aim to examine how artistic interventions deal with these contestations. Throughout the paper, we will first introduce the topic and give a theoretical background to these kinds of interventions and their surrounding debates. We will then identify different methods within artistic interventions and analyse each to find similarities and differences between the different methods used. From the Lenin statue in Ukraine turned into Darth Vader to the cloaking of Columbus in the US or the painting of monuments in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, we will consider why certain monuments are contested and how this contestation has been addressed through art.

Introduction

For over 130 years, a statue of confederate general Robert E. Lee stood in Richmond, Virginia (USA).¹ The Lee monument has become a site of protest and contestation in recent years. A site of reflection on the role of the confederacy in fighting for and embedding racism within American law and society and the effects of these actions on the lives of Americans of colour.² In much the same vein, the monument was somewhat glorified by those who sought to prevent further attempts to eradicate racial inequality within US society.³ At the height of the 2020 racial equality protests, some protesters began to reclaim the statue by coating it in slogans employed in the fight for equality.⁴ These included but were not limited to BLM (Black Lives Matter), ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards) and 'I Can't Breathe'.⁵ At certain places on the monument, the names of some people who had died at the hands of State-sanctioned police brutality were listed.⁶ This, in turn, created a mosaic-like effect on the base of the statue and caused the statue to become an internationally recognisable symbol of the racial equality protests and for genuine steps to be taken to dismantle racism in the USA and across the world. That led *The New York Times* to conclude that the site was one of the 25 most powerful pieces of post-Second World War protest art.⁷ In this regard, the statue has become a prominent example of how artistic intervention can be undertaken.



Figure 1: Image by MK17b via
Wikimedia CC 4.0

This paper will examine the diverse ways in which artistic intervention can be employed both as a means of redefining the State accepted narrative or as a means of protest against that narrative. A

¹ Shanti Escalante-de Mattei, "Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia To Be Removed," ARTnews, September 7, 2020; Matthew M. Barbee, *Race and Masculinity in Southern Memory: History of Richmond, Virginia's Monument Avenue, 1948-1996* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2014), 20.

² Hilary Green, "2 Shifting landscapes and the monument removal craze, 2015–20," *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 5 (2021); Nicole Maurantonio, "Tarred by History: Materiality, Memory, and Protest," *De Arte* 53, no. 2–3 (2018).

³ Jaime Schultz, "Contesting the Master Narrative: The Arthur Ashe Statue and Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, no. 8, (2011); Allen C. Guelzo, "Should we banish Robert E. Lee & his Confederate friends? Let's talk," *USA Today*, August 16, 2017.

⁴ Hilary Green, "2 Shifting landscapes and the monument removal craze, 2015–20," *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 5 (2021).

⁵ Shanti Escalante-de Mattei, "Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia To Be Removed," ARTnews, September 7, 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ La Force, Thessaly., Lescaze, Zoë., Hass, Nancy., and Miller, M.H., "The 25 Most Influential Works of American Protest Art Since World War II," *New York Times*, October 15, 2020.

crucial aspect in this regard is critically examining the fine line between vandalism and art.⁸ Thus, there is a need to problematise the predominant view that State intervention is acceptable and non-State intervention is criminal. In many jurisdictions, laws exist to protect monuments and an image which governments have constructed and seek to project (or at least do not choose to cease projecting).⁹ Where there have been protracted challenges to the images that are protected, one must question if affording such protection can be justified. Not least because in several countries, the USA included, the laws that protect these monuments were adopted at a time when the State actively and explicitly pursued a policy of discrimination based on race.¹⁰

Artistic intervention can be considered a remedy to contested histories. It seeks to transform the meaning and purpose of the site through its resignification. In this regard, the Tate, on its website, defines it as 'art designed specifically to interact with an existing structure or situation, be it another artwork, the audience, an institution or in the public domain.'¹¹ In response to this, commentators have highlighted that in such an instance, it falls on curators to distinguish between what is artistic and what is not.¹² There is then the risk that what is perceived as art is what the dominant actors within society feel is appropriate. Other methods of resignification include renaming the monument or installing placards or counter monuments.¹³ In this regard, through art, a single statue can be contextualised within the contestation that exists.¹⁴ For instance, in one image, the problematic nature of what Lee defended can be summarised by coating the base of the Robert E. Lee Monument with the slogans of racial equality.

Within this paper, we will examine the role of the artistic intervention as a means to re-contextualising historical disputes. In Section 2, we will delve into the nature of artistic intervention from a more theoretical perspective. This will allow us to frame the following sections properly and create a space to reflect critically on some of the practicalities of artistic intervention. A crucial question in this regard pertains to the longevity of such intervention. In the case of the Lee monument, while the intervention became an international talking point, the statue was relocated soon after to Richmond's Black History Museum. In other instances, interventions are short-lived, leading one to question whether it is a long-term solution or just a temporary one

⁸ Jonathan I. Leib, "Robert E. Lee, 'Race,' Representation and Redevelopment along Richmond, Virginia's Canal Walk," *Southeastern Geographer* 44, no. 2 (2004); Phil Hubbard, Lucy Faire and Keith Lilley, "Memorials to Modernity? Public art in the 'city of the future,'" *Landscape Research* 28, no. 2, (2003); Alison Young, "Negotiated consent or zero tolerance? Responding to graffiti and street art in Melbourne," *City* 14, no. 1-2, (2010); Stacey Vorster, "Inner-city safaris and wild public art," *Critical Arts* 27, no. 2, (2013).

⁹ See, for example, the Antiquities Act 1906 (US); Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 (UK); Bundesdenkmalschutzgesetz 1923 (Austria)

¹⁰ Ibid. These have been amended and added to since, however much of the original law remains intact.

¹¹ Tate, "Art Terms: Art Intervention," Tate.org.uk, no date.

¹² Stuckism, "Jonathan Meese: 25 February 2006," Stuckism.com, 2006.

¹³ Contested Histories, "Remedies," contestedhistories.org, n.d.

¹⁴ Eva Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 1.

during the intervening period while a long-term solution is identified.¹⁵ Sections 3, 4, and 5 will look at different examples to illustrate how artistic interventions are used. Section 3 will focus on how statues have been reconfigured to give new meaning. Section 4 will examine how other statues have been coated in a 'veneer' to give them a new meaning. The new layers might give them a new perception but not change the original meaning. In Section 5, the use of artistic intervention against memory or contested monuments will highlight the close connection between artistic intervention and counter-monument and how interventions, coming from and supporting protests, can contest both concrete and abstract notions. Finally, this will be brought together in a conclusion that will refocus on how these ideas can be operationalised.

Background

A Short History of Artistic Interventions

Since early antiquity, statues and monuments were common practice to honour the individual portrayed and to cement the memory of particular events or periods in time. According to Baltes, portrait monuments are not 'neutral historical documents' in that no monument may ever be considered purely neutral due to the specific memory of the person they evoke. Good or bad, portrait monuments will elicit powerful reactions among the general public.¹⁶ By commemorating a specific individual, one makes permanent and commemorates the era they represent, no matter how painful the associated memory may be. Similarly, what we consider to be artistic intervention in monuments and statues as an attempt to challenge or change these memories is also not just a thing of the present. Of course, it is often difficult to pinpoint to what extent historical examples can be compared to what we now consider artistic intervention. As Prof. Dr Dario Gamboni, professor of Art History, points out, there is a falsely constructed binary opposition between creation and destruction. 'Now, a closer examination of the history of any object shows that the bad treatments in question take place in a long series of interventions of which they may or may not be the final ones,' Gamboni argues.¹⁷

There is a long tradition of the modulation of monuments and icons to give off a certain statement – for instance, the abomination of religious images during Byzantine iconoclastic waves in the eighth and ninth centuries. Iconoclastic movements argued for a more abstract use of symbolism for religious purposes.¹⁸ They played an important role in Europe during the Reformation when

¹⁵ See, among others, Shanti Escalante-de Mattei, "Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia To Be Removed," ARTnews, September 7, 2020.

¹⁶ Elizabeth P. Baltes, "Challenging Narratives: Arthur Ashe and the Practice of Counter-Monumentality on Richmond's Monument Avenue," *De Arte* 53, no. 2-3 (2018): 34.

¹⁷ Dario Gamboni, *The destruction of art: iconoclasm and vandalism since the french revolution* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

images were degraded to prove their powerlessness.¹⁹ During the European expansion through the conquest of the rest of the world, the religious reasoning behind the modulation and destruction of artefacts gained a new layer. Other cultural forms of material expression were often interpreted as 'pagan' icons and thus became subject to European destruction.²⁰

The French Revolution marked a turning point in the modulation of art. Three developments took place during that time: 'a dilution of the 'spiritual content' of the attacks, a widening of their targets and a growth in the importance of aesthetic components.'²¹ These can be related to the broad socio-political nature of the revolution and the rise of ideas and values related to the nation-state and human universalism. The symbolic meaning attributed to artefacts was a central focus point for revolutionaries in their aversion to the ancien regime. The act of modulation was thus usually directed towards the symbolic content that an artefact stood for. The symbolic meaning could be reinvented through the modulation process, giving the revolutionaries access to 'pedagogical, political, and even economic potentialities.'²² Thus, the destruction was an irreversible method of parting with the old ways.²³

It was also in the aftermath of the French Revolution that the term vandalism was coined. In 1794, bishop Henri Grégoire invented the word 'not only for systematic revolutionary violence but for any act of cultural desecration, particularly against art and architecture.'²⁴ At this time, there was perhaps more space for reflection regarding the rigorous waves of rioting destruction that took place at the beginning of the Revolution.²⁵ Grégoire aimed to 'put an end to what he regarded as a hateful distortion of revolutionary principles.'²⁶ Not long after, the Restoration movement in Europe retreated even further from revolutionary ideals and actions. The term vandalism was derived from the name Vandals, a group living east of the river Rhine and North of the river Danube from the second century onwards and not entirely coincidentally associated with the overrunning of the Gauls and the Germanic invasions leading up to the fall of the Roman Empire.²⁷

With the rise of more new European nations and powers during the nineteenth and twentieth century, the destruction and disruption of artistic artefacts were increasingly organised in a daily business-like manner, systematically creating and adapting material and often art-inspired

¹⁹ Ibid., 24.

²⁰ Ibid., 23.

²¹ Ibid., 25 - 26.

²² Ibid., 26.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Andy. H. Merrills, "The Origins of 'Vandalism,'" *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 16, no. 2 (2009): 156.

²⁵ Ibid., 155 - 156.

²⁶ Ibid., 156.

²⁷ Ibid., 158.

landscapes of invented traditions.²⁸ Furthermore, a clearer idea of what was a restorative adaptation and what was degrading vandalism was conceptualised. However, a distinction was easier to make if vandalism 'came 'from below' and could be socially opposed to the world of civilisation and culture.²⁹ The moral judgement of an act of destruction became more distinctly attached to the executing actor and their relation to the status quo. The status quo refers to the system of values generally accepted as the right way to behave in the world towards, and often co-designed by, the people and institutions in power. This relation between the executor of destructive acts and the status quo defining the interpreted level of vandalism within the act is also visible in the term vandalism itself. Moreover, the rise of the institution of the museum opened a new way of remodelling the meaning of an artefact, in this case, more related to the context in which the artefact is placed.³⁰

During the World Wars, the deliberate destruction of art-related targets became a propaganda tool. It founded a party's argument that the other party wanted to endanger 'their' values and civilisation. After all, it was not just the material destruction of an artefact but also the targeting of the values attached.³¹ With the persecution of 'degenerate art,' Nazi political ideas entered the artistic sphere. Firstly, the rejection and destruction of what they labelled 'degenerate art' represented the defiance of certain people, namely the groups within society that Nazi ideology discriminated against and persecuted, fuelled by social-Darwinist ideas on race. Nevertheless, what was categorised as 'degenerate art' was not limited to the borders of Nazi ideas on race. The label of 'degenerate art' also functioned as a tool to express defiance of what modern art more generally stood for: autonomous freedom of expression and interpretation did not fit within Nazi Germany's value system.³²

Throughout history, we have witnessed various ways to use, destroy and modify, and the creation of artefacts influences societal changes and the other way around.³³ The developments mentioned above are just a few examples of this phenomenon. Prof. Dr Ann Rigney, professor of literary theory, has argued, 'destroying, reinscribing, or removing monuments helps clear the decks for something new.'³⁴

²⁸ Dario Gamboni, *The destruction of art: iconoclasm and vandalism since the french revolution* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 31; Eric Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²⁹ Ibid., 32.

³⁰ Ibid., 28.

³¹ Ibid., 33.

³² Ibid., 36 - 37.

³³ Ibid., 38.

³⁴ Ann Rigney, "Decommissioning Monuments, Mobilizing Materialities," Forthcoming in: *Handbook of Memory Activism*, ed. Y. Gutman and J. Wüstenberg (London: Routledge, 2021), 3.

Introduction to debates

Monuments result from translating abstract narratives and ideologies into tangible sites of memory. These monuments will become the subject of contestation when these narratives and ideologies are challenged due to changes in cultural context. Artistic intervention is a concrete, visible application of these challenges to the status quo. Throughout this paper, three major debates related to artistic interventions will remain a constant theme.

Vandalism

Firstly, the legal and moral line between vandalism and artistic intervention can continuously be debated. What should be focused on when distinguishing art from vandalism is the intent behind the act. American Studies Professor Erika Doss describes the process of cultural vandalism as follows:

a conscious and often violent act driven by a variety of intentions, explanations, and justifications – from feelings of rage and corresponding impulses to ruin and destroy to more calculated responses related to the public expression of certain economic and political agendas.³⁵

Political philosopher Ten-Herng Lai even suggests that some forms of vandalism line up with a form of duty to keep the status quo in check: ‘in short, when all else fails, political vandalism as a form of uncivil disobedience is justified insofar as it ‘undoes’ the harms of state-sponsored tainted symbols.’³⁶ Is the act of vandalism merely destroying or ruining what is there, or is it adding a layer of (critical) meaning? Is it even possible to merely destroy?

The division between vandalism and art is constantly evolving, and it often becomes impossible to make clear distinctions. For example, street artist Ileana Nicoleta Salcudean is moving from the periphery of acceptance into the central sphere, thus leading to more cultural acceptance. This raises the question of how important the illegal nature of street art is for this art form: ‘Is graffiti still considered graffiti even if it becomes legal?’³⁷ The placement of graffiti and street art within the category of illegality is not fixed. Street art is increasingly accepted by or even within museums or galleries. However, within society, people react differently to street art. In a way, the essential illegal nature of street art cannot be overlooked. Helen Mac Donald, an American author and critic, argues that the illegal aspect is street art’s most defining feature:

³⁵ Erika Doss, “Chapter 19 - The Process Frame: Vandalism, Removal, Re-Siting, Destruction,” In *A Companion to Public Art*, ed. Cher Krause Knight, Harriet F. Senie (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016), 404.

³⁶ Ten-Herng Lai, “Political vandalism as counter-speech: A defense of defacing and destroying tainted monuments,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (2020): 12.

³⁷ Ileana Nicoleta Sălcudean, “Art and Vandalism. CrossBreeding of Street Art (re)interpretation of street art from a sociological, aesthetical and interactivity perspective,” *Journal of Media Research* 1, no. 12 (2012): 54.

The question 'When does graffiti become art?' is meaningless. Graffiti is always vandalism. By definition, it is committed without permission on another person's property in an adolescent display of entitlement. Whether particular viewers find any given piece of graffiti artistically compelling is irrelevant. Graffiti's most salient characteristic is that it is a crime.³⁸

Author and curator Lu Olivero, who specialised in the history of urban art in Rio de Janeiro, argues that to preserve the illegal aspect of street art while at the same time accepting it as a form of art, graffiti needs illegality to function.³⁹

Top-down versus bottom-up

Even if the status quo does not see some forms of intervention as legal art, it does not mean that these interventions are not or will never be art. This leads to the next debate that should be considered for this paper: the balance of power within different kinds of artistic intervention. First, as artistic interventions often combine a socially critical message, it is understandable that the status quo could be hesitant to celebrate an intervention as art. Therefore, artistic interventions often grow from a bottom-up citizens initiative instead of a top-down government initiative. Dr Zoran Poposki, contemporary artist and curator, and Dr Marija Todorova, who specialised in Intercultural Communication, Translation Studies and Children's Literature, stress the importance of the counter-narrative that such artistic interventions offer:

By being an oppositional aesthetic practice, a form of fearless speaking in public or, in the final instance, true freedom of speech, public art of the activist or socially engaged type can offer powerful resistance to the state's power structures, becoming civic art, the type of 'art that promotes and creates civic values, invites and fosters citizen participation in public affairs,' all of which are essential to the functioning of democracy as a discursive space.⁴⁰

Paradoxically, the same status quo sometimes celebrates a form of public artistic intervention and simultaneously condemns other artistic interventions as vandalism. Take the difference in response the establishment of the art world has to art by Banksy and street art by lesser-known artists.⁴¹ Thus, artistic interventions can include state-approved vandalism, as some states fund or commission artistic interventions. Erika Doss, who specialised in public art and modern and contemporary American art, distinguishes between state-sponsored versus individual or public acts of vandalism. State-sponsored versions refer to a top-down form of vandalistic intervention done legally, so an officially commissioned act of vandalism on public property.⁴² In individual or

³⁸ Heather MacDonald, "Graffiti Is Always Vandalism," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2014.

³⁹ Lu Olivero, "Graffiti Is a Public Good, Even As It Challenges the Law," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2014.

⁴⁰ Zoran Poposki and Marija Todorova, "Public memory in post-conflict Skopje: civic art as resistance to narratives of ethnicity and disintegration," In *Post-Conflict Performance, Film and Visual Arts*, ed. Des O'Rawe Mark Phelan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 109.

⁴¹ Lu Olivero, "Graffiti Is a Public Good, Even As It Challenges the Law," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2014.

⁴² Erika Doss, "Chapter 19 - The Process Frame: Vandalism, Removal, Re-Siting, Destruction," In *A Companion to Public Art*, ed. Cher Krause Knight, Harriet F. Senie (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016), 408.

public versions, we see a bottom-up process. Here the state is not involved in the intervention; thus, there is less control over its social commentary. So, state involvement could play a role in distinguishing between art and vandalism done by the authority.

Thus, the sponsorship behind an artistic intervention often influences its critical meaning. Sometimes hegemonic powers, referring to the people and institutions in power positions who help define what is accepted in society and against which societal critique is often targeted, still support or actively commission an act of artistic intervention that is critical. Nevertheless, this top-down and often state-supported intervention will likely conform more than bottom-up initiatives with no government intervention, that in counterpart, seem to have more freedom of critical expression. Nevertheless, they might struggle to be accepted and, therefore, have to fight for their existence.

Durability

Durability could be related to the physical state of artistic intervention. For example, some are deliberately temporary, so only a limited number of people will be influenced by the layer of meaning it tries to add. However, these interventions might be discussed and have an influence even after it has been taken down, often shaking up the debate around contested histories. After all, more permanent artistic interventions risk losing their attention-grabbing characteristics as people become accustomed to seeing them. Thus, there should be a balance between the number of people to reach directly and the shock factor to provoke. This raises the question: does artistic intervention lose its purpose when it has become part of the everyday scenery? Thus, durability hints at the impact of artistic intervention on the general public. Of course, this impact is tough to measure because different parties will have different views on when and how the public has been impacted. Which raises another question: what is the purpose of an artistic intervention after the status-quo critical message it emits becomes part of the generally accepted opinion?

Furthermore, this hints at a bigger overarching question: what defines the success of an artistic intervention? Perhaps, an artistic intervention should continuously challenge the status quo and urge people interacting with the artistic intervention to reassess their views and beliefs. Perhaps an artistic intervention should work towards the absorption of the underlying message into the hegemonic ways of thinking, making the intervention redundant over time. Thus, the answer will change according to the monument and intervention. Perhaps as some form of guidance, it is wise to end on the following advice of Ann Rigney:

Gaining recognition for hitherto silenced voices and perspectives can take the form of entirely new initiatives. But paradoxically, it can actually be facilitated by the intolerable presence of the old because the latter affords a public platform – and offers a tangible focus -- for marking out

differences and demanding change in the politics of visibility. Important as they are, however, there is also a danger attached to expending too much energy on the decommissioning of existing monuments. If pushed too far, iconoclasm may end up becoming an end in itself, distracting attention from the contemporary inequalities that drove the demand for mnemonic change in the first place and creating the illusion that to change a statue is in itself a solution to the problem rather than a part, albeit a key part, of a larger dynamic of contestation.⁴³

Creation Through Destruction

As mentioned in the introduction, many people began questioning what could be done with contested monuments following the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 and the subsequent movement that saw statues worldwide being toppled from their pedestals. Some were removed from public view, some were destroyed, and some were reconstructed. In this chapter, we will explore what happened with two contested monuments: the statue of Vladimir Lenin in Odesa, Ukraine, and the statue of former Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner in Asunción.

Statue of Lenin transformed into Darth Vader by Alexander Milov in Ukraine

On October 23, 2015, a statue of Vladimir Lenin on the outskirts of Odesa underwent an unexpected transformation. During the political crisis of 2013-14 in Ukraine,⁴⁴ and a movement now referred to as *Leninopad* – or *Leninfall* – several Lenin statues around Kyiv were destroyed.⁴⁵ After this, and across the country, countless other Lenin statues and monuments were removed or destroyed, closely followed by an internet campaign that continuously updated the list of removed and remaining monuments.⁴⁶ A new law was later passed in April 2015, which denounced all ‘communists and national-socialist totalitarian regimes in Ukraine and prohibition against the propaganda of their symbols.’⁴⁷ Thus, all symbols of the communist era became forbidden in Ukrainian territory and



Figure 2: Image by Mandy barrios via Flickr CC 2.0

⁴³ Ann Rigney, "Decommissioning Monuments, Mobilizing Materialities," In *Handbook of Memory Activism*, ed. Y. Gutman and J. Wüstenberg (London: Routledge, 2021), 5.

⁴⁴ Anastasiya Pshenychnykh, "Leninfall: The spectacle of forgetting," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 394.

⁴⁵ Lyudmyla Zaporozhtseva, "Darth Vader in Ukraine: On the boundary between reality and mythology," *Semiotica* 2018, no. 221 (2018): 273.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.



Figure 3: Image by Erik via Flickr CC 2.0

were to be 'removed or destroyed.'⁴⁸ In 1991, there were over 5.500 monuments to Lenin. By the end of 2013, there were only 2.178.⁴⁹ However, one of these monuments fell through the cracks and survived the destruction of 'Leninfall,' remaining forgotten near a factory outside Odessa. Removing monuments to Lenin was now a legal requirement, so the Ukrainian authorities were obligated to take action against the abovementioned statue. Although most of Lenin's monuments were either removed or destroyed, one was painted black and reconfigured into a new monument of Darth Vader, the legendary villain from Star Wars.⁵⁰

According to Dr Pshenychnykh,⁵¹ for the protestors of the Leninfall movement, the monuments were also symbolic of the regime of President Victor Yanukovich, primarily due to his government's decision concerning Ukraine's trajectory towards Europe. For this, all ties to Ukraine's Soviet past had to be broken. The destruction of the monuments has even been referred to as a metaphorical 'war against monuments.'⁵² This 'De-Communisation' was met with celebration and seen as an example of a country shaking off its autocratic past.⁵³

Remodelled by Ukrainian sculptor Alexander Milov, the transformation of the statue of Lenin into Darth Vader went viral and met worldwide attention.⁵⁴ Milov told the BBC,

We didn't want to vandalise the statue but the monument to Lenin was due to be dismantled in connection with the new law. I decided to take a monument to Lenin and transform it into a monument to Darth Vader because at this moment Darth Vader is a political figure in Ukraine.⁵⁵

More specifically, Darth Vader and several other well-known characters from Star Wars (Chewbacca and Yoda among them) were running for office in local municipalities and regional areas as members of the 'Internet Party.'⁵⁶

In the original Star Wars films, the character of Darth Vader was portrayed as an autocratic, murderous tyrant who was ultimately defeated. By replacing Lenin's face with Darth Vader's,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Anastasiya Pshenychnykh, "Leninfall: The spectacle of forgetting," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 394.

⁵⁰ Lyudmyla Zaporozhtseva, "Darth Vader in Ukraine: On the boundary between reality and mythology," *Semiotica* 2018, no. 221 (2018): 273.

⁵¹ Anastasiya Pshenychnykh, "Leninfall: The spectacle of forgetting," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 402.

⁵² Ibid., 403.

⁵³ Owen Hatherley, "Rewriting the past: must Rhodes fall?" *Apollo Magazine*, January 29, 2016.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ TOL TOL, "Around the Bloc: Ukrainian Sculptor Morphs Lenin Into Darth Vader," *Transitions Online* 10, no. 27 (2015): 35.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Milov achieved a symbolic victory for those who suffered under Soviet rule, depicting the leader of the Soviet era as a tyrant. In addition, in converting the statue of Lenin into a famous character in popular culture, Milov invited people to mock the legacy of the Soviet Union. Lenin's transformation into an almost cartoonish villain allowed people to laugh at the memory of Soviet rule, thus reducing its power and weakening its memory.

The practice of remodelling or partially destroying a monument dates back to the Roman Empire.⁵⁷ A famous example is the Severan Family Portrait, which portrays the punishment that the Roman Emperor Caracalla inflicted on his brother Geta.⁵⁸ Geta's face was utterly erased from the family portrait, with the erasure left visible as a warning to all those who would oppose the emperor.⁵⁹



Figure 4: Image by F. Tronchin via Flickr CC 2.0

This process of 'defacement' is not something new. This common practice challenges the 'existing positive narrative'⁶⁰ surrounding the subjects of portrait statues. It, therefore, transforms a 'once-honoured individual into a negative social exemplar.'⁶¹ The 'defacement' of the statue of Lenin can also be seen as a counter-narrative being put into play. When the historical association of the statue was publicly challenged during Leninfall and later remodelled by Alexander Milov, one could argue that the narrative encompassed Lenin. As a result, the Communist Regime in Russia was in the process of being rewritten. The narrative, rather than the statue itself, was toppled. According to Doss, counter-narratives become visible when 'the history constructed by statue monuments is publicly challenged when the community changes its mind about who should be honoured or what should be valued, or when political and social power shift to include formerly marginalised voices.'⁶²

As a result, we could agree that recontextualising a contested monument potentially holds more power than simply removing or destroying it. When discussing the Roman practice of 'damnatio memoriae'⁶³ – a process that usually ended with the destruction of statues – he argues that complete erasure is not the most effective method to challenge the narrative surrounding the

⁵⁷ Elizabeth P. Baltes, "Challenging Narratives: Arthur Ashe and the Practice of Counter-Monumentality on Richmond's Monument Avenue," *De Arte* 53, no. 2-3 (2018): 36.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 324-325.

⁶³ Elizabeth P. Baltes, "Challenging Narratives: Arthur Ashe and the Practice of Counter-Monumentality on Richmond's Monument Avenue," *De Arte* 53, no. 2-3 (2018): 36.

statue's subject. Instead, 'leaving visual evidence of the narrative shift'⁶⁴ is often a more powerful declaration than complete eradication. By changing the meaning of the Lenin statue through partial destruction, Milov essentially stripped it of its power in the Ukrainian consciousness, reducing it to a joke and an invitation for ridicule. This leads us to ask, is creating a more powerful method than outright destruction? As the partial destruction of the statue of Lenin into Darth Vader can also be construed as an act of creation, one might describe this particular artistic intervention as 'creative destruction.'

Statue of Alfredo Stroessner remodelled by Carlos Colombino, Paraguay

In Paraguay, the legacy of former dictator Alfredo Stroessner lived on for decades after his demise. Stroessner, who is blamed for the arrests of over 20,000 people, the expulsion of another 20,000 and the disappearance of 425 people, had plaques and statues commemorating him across the country after his death.⁶⁵ In 2019, the removal of a sixteen-foot statue of Stroessner in Asunción was ordered by the then-mayor, Carlos Alberto Filizzola Pallarés.⁶⁶ Despite the efforts of a large group of volunteers, the statue proved enormously difficult to take down. Eventually, they succeeded. However, the Municipality placed the statue in storage for the following four years.⁶⁷ Many attempted to recover the statue during this time, even offering the municipality money to restore it. One of them was artist Carlos Colombino, who proposed to remodel the statue into a memorial to all of Stroessner's victims.⁶⁸ The statue was cut into pieces, with Stroessner's head and recognisable features left intact, and subsequently placed between two large pillars of cement, giving the appearance of Stroessner being crushed to death.



Figure 5: Image by Iwan via Wikimedia CC 4.0

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Adriana Catano, "How Do We Deal With Confederate Statues? Here's an Ingenious Example From Paraguay." *Remezcla*, August 17, 2017.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

This counter-monument could be deemed as a 'dialogic monument'⁶⁹ because it critiques the intent behind the existing monument and renders the monument a reversed rendition of the original through its transformation.

The reconfigured statue was erected in 1995 at the *Plaza De Los Desaparecidos* (Square of the Disappeared). During the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020, NYU Professor Tom Sugrue used Colombino's efforts as inspiration for what the USA could do regarding the country's contested monuments. In his words, the USA should follow in Paraguay's footsteps and 'turn a celebration of tyranny into a powerful symbol of resistance.'⁷⁰



Figure 6: Image by chtodelat.vil via Flickr CC 2.0

The administrative director of the Municipality, Juan Fernando Pali Kurz, discussed the decision to remove the statue, saying:

When we learned of the goal, those of us who were also part of the political team experienced an enormous sense of joy, for the role that history was allowing us to play. We did not measure that throwing the statue was going to be the symbol of throwing Stroessner himself and that the repercussions would be national and global.⁷¹

Pali Kurz was in charge of gathering the team and resources necessary to remove the statue.⁷² Concerning contested monuments, some claim that the outcomes of monument reconstruction, as is the case with the statue of Stroessner, hinge on the participation and cooperation of elites and local authorities.⁷³ However, we can argue that the 'institutional placement' of the Municipality, their active participation in the removal and subsequent remodelling of the statue, was crucial to recontextualise the monument in question.

Nevertheless, there were some concerns during the procedure. For example, according to Pali Kurz, some workers had previously been affiliated with Stroessner, so what if they refused to carry out the task?⁷⁴ In addition, despite the relief of the monument's reconfiguration, there were mixed

⁶⁹ Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck, and Ruth Fazakerley, "Counter-Monuments: the Anti-Monumental and the Dialogic," *Journal of Architecture* 23, no. 5 (2018): 719.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 719.

⁷¹ Andrés C. Gutiérrez, "The day Stroessner was knocked down from Cerro Lambaré," *Ultima Hora*, March 10, 2022.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Christina Simko, David Cunningham, and Nicole Fox, "Contesting Commemorative Landscapes: Confederate Monuments and Trajectories of Change," *Social Problems* 69, no. 3 (2020): 4.

⁷⁴ Andrés C. Gutiérrez, "The day Stroessner was knocked down from Cerro Lambaré," *Ultima Hora*, March 10, 2022.



Figure 7: Image by Jim McCulloch via Flickr. Courtesy of the owner.

reactions amongst the public, with some claiming that Filizzola was 'trying to destroy a national heritage.'⁷⁵

The situation produced mixed reactions in public opinion. While opponents and critics of Stronismo condemned 'the return of the famous 'higher order,' supporters of the defenestrated dictator applauded the interruption ordered by Rodríguez, claiming that Filizzola was 'trying to destroy a national heritage.'⁷⁶ Following the statue's removal and storage, Kurz states, 'It was the place where we thought it was safest to have it, but now I think

throwing it among the old irons and waste was like putting it in that place that Trotsky once mentioned: in the dustbin of history.'⁷⁷

Like in the previous example, this statue is a prime example of the power of reconfiguring a contested monument rather than simply removing or destroying it. By mutilating the statue and placing Stroessner in a position, not unlike his many victims, his legacy, memory, and fascist ideology are severely damaged. As previously mentioned, Stroessner was a dictator and Nazi sympathiser. Under his rule, he authorised state-sponsored kidnappings, torture and the murder of over 3,500 people.⁷⁸ One could argue that the disfiguring of the original statue pays homage to the victims, as Stroessner is now in the same position as thousands of his citizens. According to Osborne,⁷⁹ when a monument has been remodelled, three primary aspects reveal the concept of its 'counter-monumental' activity. Most fittingly, one relates to the defacement of the nose, eyes and hands,⁸⁰ which directly relates to the remodelled statue of Stroessner.

Nevertheless, the reconfigured monument can be argued as having been 'vandalised.' However, what does 'vandalism' signify? Can something be described as vandalised when a government body has commissioned it? Is it vandalism only when someone describes it as such? Moreover, is vandalism itself a form of creation or destruction?

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Chris Moss, "Why the toppling of Colston's statue was a missed opportunity," *Telegraph*, June 9, 2020.

⁷⁹ James F. Osborne, "Counter-monumentality and the vulnerability of memory," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 17, no. 2 (2017): 177.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

A Veneer of Contestation

There are many ways of dealing with past monuments. This chapter will present case studies that used artistic intervention to cover the original monument and alter its meaning in public space. We will focus on the cloaking of the statue of Christopher Columbus in Miami Beach, Florida, and the modified Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, Bulgaria. In these examples, existing monuments were used as a base for temporary acts of protest by adding more elements, with the particularity that both interventions were commissioned. Sometimes, the line between artistic interventions and vandalism is blurred in the cases of altered monuments. Nevertheless, this does not happen in the case of commissioned artistic interventions that are agreed upon beforehand.

However, the supposed meaning of different monuments can be subjective, and debates over a monument's particular context have proven extremely commonplace. There is an ongoing dialogue over how a monument is perceived in public spaces between different audiences. The following case studies are examples of contested monuments and therefore covered or altered.

Cloaking of the statue of Christopher Columbus by Joiri Minaya in Florida

In 2020, many contested monuments linked to confederacy, slavery and colonialism were removed, vandalized and targeted during a global wave of protest against racial injustice.⁸¹ The Christopher Columbus statue in Miami Beach was part of a series of cloaked statues executed by artist Joiri Minaya, also related to the wave of protest.⁸² Several Columbus statues have been removed or dismantled as he and his actions are considered contested. The European explorer was always well-known for his discovery of America. However, it can also be linked to the brutal treatment and exploitation of the native people in the Americas. Although Columbus remains a highly contested figure worldwide, he continues to be celebrated in many countries – like the United States, Spain and Italy.⁸³

The Dominican-American artist works with public installations; in this instance, she used tight, green spandex to cover the statue of Christopher Columbus. When looking at this artistic intervention closely, two things are evident: the green colour of the spandex, reminiscent of the colour of oxidized statues, and the spandex's floral pattern. The artist designed the tropical pattern on the spandex and showcased illustrations of plants like *rompe saraguey*, an indigenous herb used for spiritual cleansing, protection and purification.⁸⁴ The artist uses these symbols to

⁸¹ Mora Beauchamp-Byrd, "Joiri Minaya's Cloaking of the Statue of Christopher Columbus." *ReVista*, August 24, 2021.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

reference narratives beyond praising a figure like Christopher Columbus. It can be viewed as cleansing or redressing the statue, putting it in a different perspective.

Additionally, similar statues were cloaked on a bridge in Hamburg (see the image above). These statues were also cloaked as they were a tribute to explorers of the colonial past: Christopher Columbus, Vasco Da Gama, Fernão Magalhães (Magellan) and James Cook. Joiri Minaya has done this to multiple statues, specifically Christopher Columbus statues, to spark discussion and make a political statement.⁸⁵ Examples of these Columbus statues are the Columbus statue in front of the Government House in Nassau, The Bahamas, the Columbus statue behind the Bayfront Park Amphitheatre in Miami, Florida and Columbus in the Colonial City of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.⁸⁶



Figure 8: Image by Michael Hamburg via Flickr.com CC 2.0

Covering or re-dressing a monument can be seen as a form of artistic intervention, which influences its perceived meaning.⁸⁷ The cloaking can be seen as the veil that influences the perceived meaning. Artistic interventions like these, while not legal, are seen as relatively harmless. The intention was not to demolish the cloaked statues, as the artists were meant to raise questions about the changing and fluid meaning of monuments as a whole and about deromanticizing the colonial practices that these statues stand for.

⁸⁵ Joiri Minaya, "The Cloaking," Joiri Minaya, n.d.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Mohamed-Mahmoud Mohamedou; Davide Rodogno. "Temps, espaces et histoires Monuments et héritage raciste et colonial dans l'espace public genevois: état des lieux historique. Étude pour la Ville de Genève". Département d'histoire et politique internationales Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement, Geneva Graduate Institute, 2022. "Voilage" can be translated by "veiling" which is: "covering the monument with a veil, either temporarily (for a public period of reflection in the mode of "stop looking and think") or permanently. The advantage is to signal that the public space is problematic, that a reflection is in fieri. It is a symbolic and artistic, even philosophical, act that can be accompanied by an explanation." p.141.

The Monument to the Soviet Army by 'Destructive Creation' in Bulgaria

The Monument to the Soviet Army is located in Sofia, in the middle of a popular city centre park. The monument has stood there since 1954 and commemorates the 10th anniversary of the Bulgarian liberation by the Soviet Army. It is contested as it implies a Russian perspective of the Bulgarian military history during World War II. Thus, many associates the monument with Russian propaganda and call for its removal. For example, one of Sofia's district's mayors called for the monument's removal as it symbolised the communist era.⁸⁸

The monument portrays a multitude: a fighter, a woman and her baby, a man on one side, and a group of Soviet soldiers on another. The latter is where the monument's contestations focus and which has been targeted multiple times by political artists.⁸⁹ One of the soldiers was painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag in February 2014 to show solidarity with Ukraine. In August 2013, all the figures were painted pink as a sign of solidarity with the Czech Republic. Under the pink-painted monument, a statement was written: 'Bulgaria apologises,' a reference to the Bulgarian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. These are just two examples of how the monument has been used for political protests.⁹⁰

The example we will focus on is from 2011 when this monument was painted to depict superheroes and action figures from American popular culture. The work was claimed by a group of anonymous artists called 'Destructive Creation.'⁹¹ These artists turned the soldiers into several characters: Superman, the Joker, Robin, Captain America, Ronald McDonald, Santa Claus, Wolverine, The Mask, and Wonder Woman. Underneath the panel, the text was spray painted and read the Bulgarian words 'в крак с времето,' which translates to 'Keeping up with the times.' Within a few days, the altered monument gained worldwide attention. People arrived in droves to take photos, which caught the attention of the international press.⁹² However, soon afterwards, the paint was removed. Despite this, the unknown artists were praised for sparking a societal discussion, with the monument acting as a talking point on pro and anti-Russian dialogue across Bulgarian society. By contrast, Russia's foreign ministry encouraged Sofia to find and punish the people because they viewed it as an act of vandalism. According to them, it was considered vandalism as it conveyed a disrespectful image of the memory of the depicted Soviet soldiers who fell in the name of freeing Bulgaria.⁹³

⁸⁸ BBC News, "Bulgaria Soviet monument in Sofia gets Ukraine twist," BBC News, February 25, 2014.

⁸⁹ Mina Ivanova, "The Bulgarian Monument to the Soviet Army: Visual Burlesque, Epic, and the Emergence of Comic Subjectivity," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 100, no. 3 (2014), 273–302.

⁹⁰ BBC News, "Bulgaria Soviet monument in Sofia gets Ukraine twist," BBC News, February 25, 2014.

⁹¹ Destructive Creation, "Home page," Destructive Creation, (n.d.).

⁹² Tom Parfitt, "Russia not amused at Red Army statue re-invented as Superman and friends," *The Guardian*, November 26, 2017.

⁹³ Ibid.

The combination of these pop culture heroes and the sprayed slogan conveys a clear message about the duality of Soviet soldiers pitted against Western symbols of modern society. It is evident that 'destructive creation' speaks volumes about Bulgaria's position in modern society while also showcasing those monuments imbued with painful parts of our history that are no longer sustainable today.



Figure 9: Image by Raya Rayax via Flickr.com CC 2.0

Together with the Columbus statue, these two examples describe two different artistic interventions transforming monuments' aspects and changing their meaning. There seems to be a need to hide monuments that no longer embody the country's or the population's current beliefs or values. Thus, covering or transforming them, even temporarily, can provide a certain element of 'shock factor,' attracting media attention and provoking a conversation.⁹⁴ The cloaking of the Christopher Columbus statue demonstrates that through an unconventional transformation, an opportunity is created to reflect on the past and present meaning of the monument. The story behind the artistic intervention then comes forward and stands for more than might be visible initially.⁹⁵ Lastly, the Bulgarian monument was already contested, which might be why it was used for multiple artistic interventions putting it in the spotlight many times. Thus, we can argue that both monuments became a canvas for creative interventions highlighting the hidden meanings behind them.

Creation through Protest

In the previous chapters, we saw that artistic intervention could take many forms to deal with contested monuments and memories. Chapter 3 examined the reconsideration of a contested monument through artistic commissioned works. In contrast, Chapter 4 focused on modifying the monument's meaning through street art or graffiti. In this chapter, we will explore how memorials are created through protest as a spontaneous remedy to contest an official, divisive or dominant memory and the monuments that go with it.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Mohamed-Mahmoud Mohamedou; Davide Rodogno. "Temps, espaces et histoires Monuments et héritage raciste et colonial dans l'espace public genevois: état des lieux historique. Étude pour la Ville de Genève. Département d'histoire et politique internationales Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement", Geneva Graduate Institute, 2022. "Voilage" can be translated by "veiling" which is: "covering the monument with a veil, either temporarily (for a public period of reflection in the mode of "stop looking and think") or permanently. The advantage is to signal that the public space is problematic, that a reflection is in fieri. It is a symbolic and artistic, even philosophical, act that can be accompanied by an explanation." 141.

We will use two examples of spontaneous artistic interventions born out of protest: the Pink Tank in the Czech Republic and the Blank Slate: Hope for a New America in the US. The former should be considered because even though it was a war machine, it became a memorial countering the dominant discourse it symbolised. The latter is a spontaneous counter-monument created by a society protesting against the standing monuments of racist figures in the USA. Both examples question the threshold between vandalism, disobedience and unauthorised installations and their evolution. Through them, we will highlight the importance of the artist's role in society and how effective these monuments can be compared to commissioned works.

The Pink Tank by Černý in the Czech Republic

The Pink Tank, originally known as The Monument to Soviet Tank Crews, had been standing on a massive pedestal in the middle of a square in Prague since 1945. The green tank was said to be the first tank to come into the city during its liberation in World War II by the USSR. Nonetheless, this narrative is also contested by a counter-memory according to which the citizens of Prague liberated themselves before the Soviet armies' arrival. The latter nonetheless took credit and imposed their rule in the following decades. In this already conflicted context, the tank became a symbol of the dictatorial rule of the USSR. Indeed, in 1989, the police repressed a students' demonstration commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Nazi storming of



Figure 10: Image by Štů via Wikimedia Commons CC 3.0

Prague University. It led to the non-violent Velvet Revolution, in which David Černý, author of the Pink Tank, took part. The Revolution resulted in the collapse of Soviet governance in Czechoslovakia. The Tank fixates on the difficult intersection between conflicted memories and the contestation of the USSR's city liberation and its totalitarian domination over the country for the forty next years. In 1991, two years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Černý, whose work was from early on linked to the criticism of the official narrative, covered the tank with pink paint. His artistic intervention shifted the focus and denounced the ambivalent role of the USSR in Czechoslovakia. However, it was soon painted back, and Černý was arrested for 'civil disobedience,' which led to more protests and the repainting of the pink tank. As a result, the tank was taken away, moved to a museum outside of the city, and a fountain was built in place of it. Some considered removing the tank a relief for local authorities because it was 'a historical nonsense.'⁹⁶

However, some also argued that this removal was inappropriate, as the 'controversial art intervention in 1991 in Prague's public space summarised [people's] sentiment' about the USSR's

⁹⁶ Pavla Horáková, "The complicated history of Prague's Tank No. 23," *Radio Prague International*, August 5, 2005.

domination.⁹⁷ The artist took an initiative that was considered vandalism. However, it transformed the tank into an art piece questioning this controversial monument and the attached memories. Some years later, a huge pink middle finger was added on top of the tank. It was removed and reinstalled when it paraded in 2011 through the Vltava river during the 20th anniversary of the end of Soviet rule in Czechoslovakia. The Pink Tank should be considered a creation because, through its transformation into an art piece, it embodies the protest against a hegemonic narrative of memory, as said by Takac:⁹⁸

David Černý's famous action became a significant part of public memory and an apparent source of inspiration for young artists. It tells much about the former zeitgeist and the feeling of repression to which various young people around the globe are currently exposed in societies operating under different ideological and political matrixes.⁹⁹

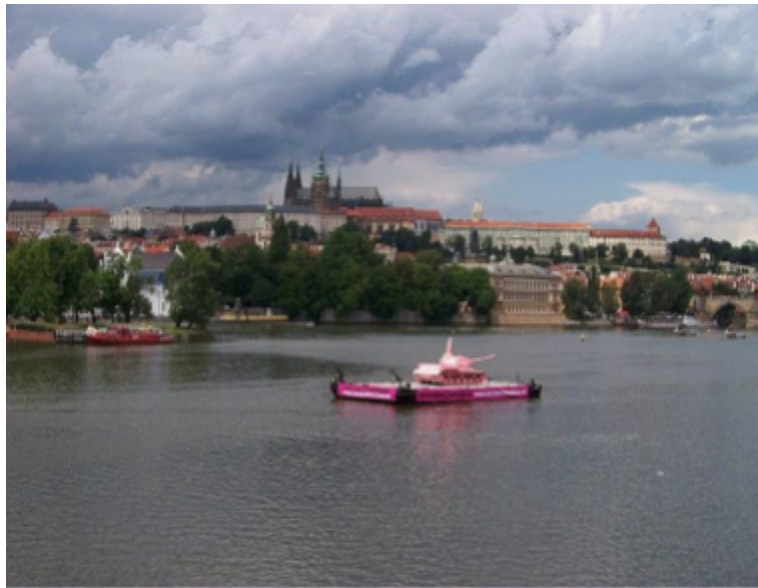


Figure 11: Image by by Štů via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0

The Blank Slate: Hope for a New America, by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo in the USA

The second case study corresponds to the sculpture titled *The Blank Slate: Hope for a New America* by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo. The Ghanaian artist is known for his cultural activism and artworks related to Black history and memory. The monument was not commissioned but rather imagined by the artist who is pursuing his activism through this voluntary work. The monument can be considered a mobile art installation that should travel from city to city and be installed near

⁹⁷ Balasz Takac, "When David Černý Made a Tank Monument Interesting," *Widewalls*, May 6, 2020.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Black history landmarks with the city's authorisation. Completed in December 2019, it has been described as a visual representation of the evolution of the Black experience and struggle in America and a tribute to African American history.¹⁰⁰ Its Instagram page defines the monument as 'an awe-striking, allegorical deconstruction of that notion, challenging the onlooker to seek a deeper understanding of the African American experience before, during and after the American Civil War.'¹⁰¹ Thus, it resonates with the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, especially if we consider George Floyd's murder and the position of the slave figure being put down on the ground with a foot on his head.



Figure 12: Image by Mandy barrios via Flickr.com CC 2.0

Indeed, it represents four Black figures, all symbolising African Americans' painful experiences. Each figure is placed on top of the next generation: an enslaved person, a lynched union soldier, an activist woman holding the interactive screen and a baby representing the next generation.¹⁰² In contrast to statues of



Figure 13: Image by Morris Sinclair via Blank Slate Movement courtesy of the author

confederate heroes [who] are typically depicted standing atop 'pedestals of privilege,' the figures in Blank Slate are standing on top of the only thing they have—each other—a powerful representation of how only through generations of determined cooperation can the underprivileged elevate each other enough to have a voice to speak truth to power.¹⁰³

Its installation in each new city entails participatory practices, commemorative celebrations and conferences about Black history as a 'multi-city bidding process will determine its final and permanent location.' Thus, the choice of location is also symbolic, like a protest of its own, to inspire a movement and change.¹⁰⁴

The two examples highlighted defining elements of this creation remedy through protest. On the one hand, Blank Slate underlines the

¹⁰⁰ Katie Tercek, Keaton Ebely, "Community leaders unveil 'Blank Slate Monument' at Lyles Station," 14 News, June 11, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Blank Slate Monument. "The Blank Slate Palimpsest Monument ("Blank Slate") is an awe-striking, allegorical deconstruction of that notion, challenging the onlooker to seek a deeper understanding of the "African American" experience before, during and after the American Civil War (1861-1865). #blankslatemonument #africanart #osrambamedia #africanamericanhistory #ghanaianart". Instagram, October 12, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGPqWjPhnm/>.

¹⁰² The different symbols are explained on the monument's website: <https://blankslatemonument.com/symbolism/>.

¹⁰³ Blank Slate Monument, "New 'Interactive' Monument to Tour Across U.S. as Tribute to African American History and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice," Cision PR Newswire, May 26, 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

importance of the artists' societal vision and spontaneity. It encourages peaceful protest and collaboration with authorities as the art intervention as a temporal installation enables the discussion to move forward. The remedy may be an interim, but its impact may contribute to an effective, long-lasting solution. On the other hand, the Pink Tank shows that the process of memory can happen through protest and transforming symbols with art. The evolution of the opinion is also significant; it shows that what can first be seen as an act of vandalism on public property may be considered an artistic intervention with time.

Artivism: The Artist as Protests' Conciliator

The artist is often considered a critic of society and someone who expresses public objection to a societal or political issue. Art, like protests, is a way to express feelings and ideas. Artivism, a word made of art and activism, conceptualises that some artists' work reflects and participates in their activism and promotes their political, social or societal engagement. In Tate's podcast, *The Art of Protest*, artists explain their processes related to artivism. For instance, the artist Jeremy Deller states, 'I do make things in reaction to the things that are making me angry, about it's about people being unhappy with something really, and try and do something about it.'¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Anahita Rezvani-Rad considers her art to be 'an act of protest,'¹⁰⁶ and artist Raju Rage affirms he is 'an artist, (...) an educator and an activist.'¹⁰⁷ When protests erupt surrounding contested monuments or memories, artists may wish to contribute to this movement by creating art and placing it in the public sphere as the society's disapproval's personalisation. In both case studies, artists produce effect through their art, which effectively passes the message and creates a new meaning for the object, especially in the Pink Tank.

Dr Atkinson-Phillips states that traditional memorials, whose authorisation and commission may hinder their effectiveness, create less meaning and affect than contemporary artworks commemorating pasts whose impact is still felt today and needs to be addressed.¹⁰⁸ The artist's aesthetic work is a way to reach people via their senses and emotions, which have already been made public by the protests. These pieces also help those who did not participate in the conversation to get involved or touched by the artistic visualisation of what contesting a particular monument or memory encompasses¹⁰⁹ and ask them to 'take on the responsibility of paying attention.'¹¹⁰ Art offers unsettling experiences to viewers, giving a stronger impact to the protest. Therefore, artists and their artworks, which are not commissioned here, can make the protest live

¹⁰⁵ "The Art of Protest". Tate podcast, 0:47, posted on Sept. 26, 2018

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 7:40.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 10:47.

¹⁰⁸ Alison Atkinson-Phillips, "On being moved: art, affect and activation in public commemorations of trauma," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 32, no. 3 (2018): 381–392.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 383.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 390.

long by materialising its content. The intervention in the public sphere makes the contest visible by rallying people's protest. Atkinson-Philipps, quoting Senior Director for Transitional Justice Ereshnee Naidu, also considers that in post-conflict societies, the 'success' of memorial projects in making a positive social impact 'depends on how it relates to other forms of reparations as well as the processes around which the memorial project is initiated.'¹¹¹ Like the authors who mention artists as 'key people,' we believe that letting artists be the voice of the repair with their creations may be an efficient remedy.

Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, with his Blank Slate, is acting according to the contemporary artists' embrace of monuments 'as a form for art-making (...) [and] artists have engaged in the production of monuments, memorials, and counter monuments as a means to participate in, and critique public and political discourses.'¹¹² With his artwork, the Ghanaian artist encourages peaceful protest as he explicitly said himself:

Blank is the slate that we write on, but we see through. I sculpt yes, but the statement is not my own. The statement is for the people, the African American people, the black people, and people who want to speak up against the tradition of injustice. That is why the slate is left blank.¹¹³

Between Spontaneous Art Installation, Accepted Disobedience and Vandalism

Artists participate in shifting the discourse or underlining the importance of some aspects, not by modifying an existing artistic and contested monument but through a creation, an addition, and a new meaningful element in the memory landscape. This path starts with something that first appeared threatening or destructive, i.e. protests, through which an artistic and meaningful object emerges.

Artistic intervention might emanate from artists who react to a contested monument by creating a countermonument. Understood as the *doublement*¹¹⁴ described by Mohamed-Mahmoud Mohamedou and Davide Rodogno, counter monuments 'confront or disrupt established meanings and tropes: purpose and subject matter, duration, style and form, as well as relationships of authoritativeness, authorship and reception.'¹¹⁵ The Blank Slate matches this idea. It is partly

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 386, quoting (Naidu 2014, 35).

¹¹² Amy Bowman-McElhone, Carrie Fonder, Joshua Aiken and Karyn Olivier, "The Battle is Joined: Contemporary Art and Contested Memorial Ecologies," *SOCIAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY* 102, no. 3 (2021): 1183.

¹¹³ D'Arcy, Sardone, "The Blank Slate: Hope for a New America - New 'interactive' monument to tour across the U.S. as tribute to African American history," *The Ritz Herald*, May 27, 2021.

¹¹⁴ Mohamed-Mahmoud Mohamedou; Davide Rodogno. "Temps, espaces et histoires Monuments et héritage raciste et colonial dans l'espace public genevois: état des lieux historique. Étude pour la Ville de Genève". Département d'histoire et politique internationales Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement, Geneva Graduate Institute, 2022. "Doublement" can be translated from French into "doubling", meaning that: "the racist monument is 'surrounded' by one or more monuments of an opposing nature, commemorating or celebrating individuals or actions that are clearly anti-racist, anti-colonial and anti-slavery" 140-141.

¹¹⁵ Quentin Stevens, Karen Franck & Ruth Fazakerley, "Counter-monuments: the anti-monumental and the dialogic," *The Journal of Architecture* 17, no. 6 (2012): 967.

intended to act as a counter-monument, or rather a creation, designed to balance the lack of similar monuments for black history and memory compared to the 1,500 confederate statues still standing in the USA. This monument conforms with Stevens and others' definition of a dialogic monument which 'critiques the purpose and the design of a specific, existing monument, in an explicit, contrary and proximate pairing.'¹¹⁶ The limitation of such a remedy is its monumentality which can hinder its future effectiveness.¹¹⁷

As the monument is temporary and mobile, it seeks to contest all of the latter. The tour passes through major American Black history cities, including Detroit, Louisville, Chicago, Atlanta, Selma, NYC and Washington DC, making it cover more ground than a single sculpture. For Doss, permanence can be the tricky and problematic feature of monuments. She suggests that

The most efficacious solution to the dilemma of public art's permanence is the temporary installation. (...) Temporary public art projects override the "propertization" of public culture, encouraging artists and audiences alike to (re)visualise public spaces and places, and to rethink ideas about how art and its publics interact.¹¹⁸

Baltes backs up this argument by saying that 'it is precisely because these interventions are ephemeral that they are effective; they are never visible long enough to become invisible through familiarity and inaccessibility.'¹¹⁹ The artist made the sculpture in 2019 without being commissioned. However, its installation in different cities must be authorised. It is usually accompanied by speeches and other events in symbolic places, promoted through social media. Mixing the interactive and the participatory engages the viewers. At the same time, it helps to sustain the social movement around Black Lives Matter: 'Make the monument serve as the very vehicle for a nonviolent protest of confederate memorials and spaces which are insensitive to the African American experience and contributions.'¹²⁰

Artivism can also shift an existing object's meaning by transforming it into a monument or what can be considered a piece of art. This matches the Pink Tank's example in which the painting constitutes a *voilage* remedy.¹²¹ Indeed, the art intervention in the case of the Pink Tank can be seemingly simplified into vandalism. However, this pink paint coverage, Černý, creates an entirely

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 953.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 951-972.

¹¹⁸ Erika Doss, "The Process Frame Vandalism, Removal, Re-Siting, Destruction," In *A Companion to Public Art*, ed. Cher Krause Knight & Harriet F. Senie (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016) p. 418.

¹¹⁹ Elizabeth P. Baltes, "Challenging Narratives: Arthur Ashe and the Practice of Counter-Monumentality on Richmond's Monument Avenue," *De Arte* 53, no. 2 (2018): 46.

¹²⁰ The Blank Slate Monument, "Monument," The Blank Slate Monument, n.d.

¹²¹ Mohamed-Mahmoud Mohamedou; Davide Rodogno. "Temps, espaces et histoires Monuments et héritage raciste et colonial dans l'espace public genevois: état des lieux historique. Étude pour la Ville de Genève. Département d'histoire et politique internationales Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement", Geneva Graduate Institute, 2022. "Voilage" can be translated by "veiling" which is: "covering the monument with a veil, either temporarily (for a public period of reflection in the mode of "stop looking and think") or permanently. The advantage is to signal that the public space is problematic, that a reflection is in fieri. It is a symbolic and artistic, even philosophical, act that can be accompanied by an explanation." 141. The paint of the tank can be seen as this veil.

new meaning and interpretation for the tank. The Czech artist unfolds the protests underlying the population when the Soviet occupation ended. Its art intervention between memory work and activism is now accepted as artwork and contested memory remedy. As these unprompted art interventions come from protests, they are usually made and installed without official authorisation. In that sense, they can flirt with vandalism. However, history has shown that these pieces are more effective and later legally and socially accepted.

Spontaneous and protest-related art interventions can be considered an efficient remedy because they are creations that embody specific emotions and display silenced pasts at the root of the discussion. When commissioned artworks try to imitate this kind of work, it easily becomes contraband. As Arthur Ashe's sculpture demonstrates, this creation through the protest phenomenon rarely works on command. This is why allowing artists to express society's feelings may be an adequate solution. The contrast between Arthur Ashe's sculpture, qualified as a 'failure' by Baltes,¹²² with Černý's Pink Tank and Akoto-Bamfo's Blank Slate's successes emphasises the malfunction of commissioned art piece that makes one wonder if it is not more effective when the monument or the art intervention emanates from the people and through their manifestation and protest, rather than being a counter-monument coming from a top-down decision.



Figure 14: Image by Ron Cogswell via Flickr CC 2.0

Summary and Conclusion

On September 21, 2021, the site of one of the most identifiable artistic interventions of the last years was dismantled. The statue of Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, was decommissioned and taken to storage. The plinth was removed soon after. This is not uncommon. Artistic intervention is often short-lived: as has been the case with the Cloaking of Columbus and Pink Tank. However, as the Statue of Darth Vader (formerly Vladimir Lenin) by Alexander Milov and the Statue of Alfredo Stroessner remodelled by Carlos Colombino show, it does not have to be. This article analyses several examples of artistic intervention, highlighting the diverse ways artistic intervention is envisioned. They reflect considerably different contexts and show that artistic intervention is employed to respond to differing contestations. Artistic intervention could then be considered one of the more difficult remedies in that, while it works, it

¹²² Elizabeth. P. Baltes, "Challenging Narratives: Arthur Ashe and the Practice of Counter-Monumentality on Richmond's Monument Avenue," *De Arte* 53, no.2-3 (2018): 31-50.

can be powerful and welcomed. However, it can easily be the subject of contestation in its own right due to the projected new representation and the by-product: the original statue is reconfigured, in many instances, irreversibly.

As such, several essential considerations must accompany planned artistic intervention. With these considerations, however, it ought to be stressed that, as highlighted by the case studies, there is always a degree of spontaneity. It must also be stressed that a given intervention's specific contexts determine its success. On these precursory points, the considerations that we believe are most important are:

Its temporality

There remains a question as to whether artistic intervention can serve as a long-term remedy for contested history. In several instances, artistic intervention problematised the presence of a monument and served to accelerate reaching a long-term solution. However, the ability of the artistic intervention to serve as a durable solution is questionable. One could argue that this balances where one draws the line as to long-term. Is it five years long? If not, is it 10, 20 or even 30 years long? Several of the monuments being protested have lifespans of over 100 years. A solution that lasts a fraction of that does not sound like a reliable remedy to deal with the contestation. In this regard, it must be questioned if and specifically under which conditions artistic intervention can serve as a durable solution for contested history.

Its legality

When is something legal? This question has been a subject of academic study for nearly as long as the law has existed. Is it only legal where the law does not prohibit it or where authorities allow it to go undeterred? Throughout this article, the notion of legality has been toyed with. There have been numerous cases where the law has been disregarded due to policy considerations. When it is successful, it is legal – when it is not, it is illegal. Thus, the legality of an intervention is determined post hoc and can often be tied to societal approval.

Its conformity

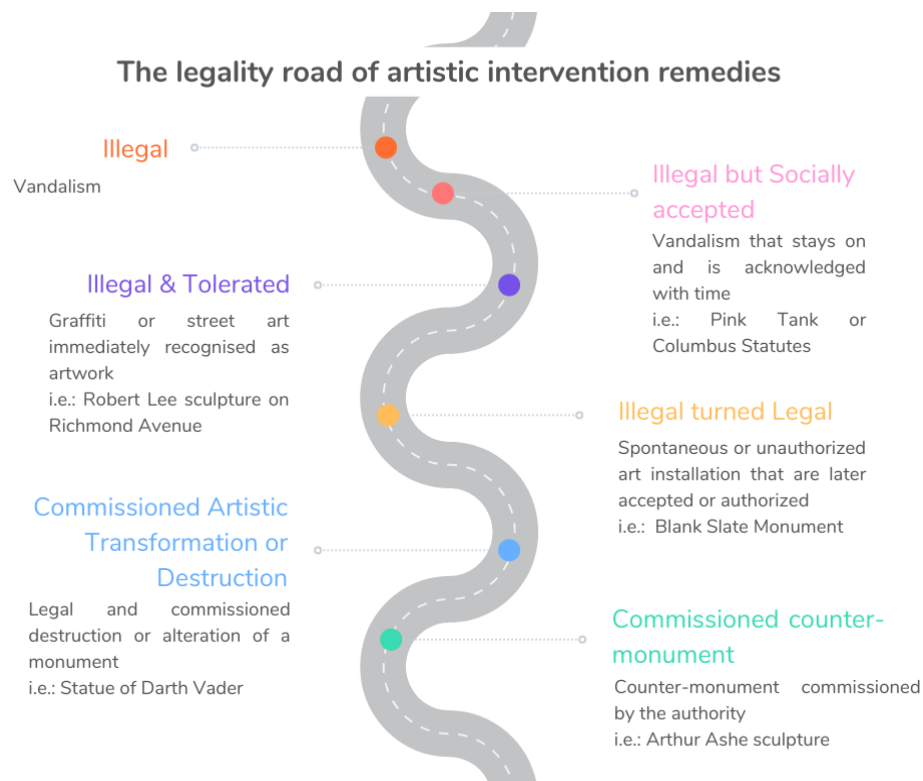
This article highlights several prominent examples of artistic interventions as a protest, which differ quite considerably from State-sanctioned or commissioned interventions. This leads to an important consideration. When conducting artistic interventions, how existing power relations affect the intervention will likely impact its reception. The State often triggers many of the interventions that are accepted as long-term installations – as such. They reflect a component within a more substantial change to the dominant narrative. That said, this also means that they

will likely again become contested as future governments seek to recontextualise public representations of the past. Several of the examples analysed do not reflect attempts by the State to change the narrative. They reflect individuals challenging the dominant 'official' narrative: this is considerably more organic and near impossible to manufacture.

Its novelty

Earlier the short lifespan of artistic intervention was examined; now, one ought to ask if that is not, in fact, a benefit. One must ask if much of the power of artistic intervention is not derived from its short lifespan. Over time, the dominant narrative would find a new position. While the mosaic highlighted the pain and suffering that Lee had defended clearly and concisely, Lee was still on top. The narrative remained inextricably tied to him.

To assist in determining the positioning of a given intervention, we have created a diagram that highlights the variety of interventions under the heading of artistic intervention, a tool kit of kinds to support and facilitate discussions about own contested monuments and to allow for adequate artistic intervention to be deployed, if there is one. Each situation is different, and no pre-determined solution is guaranteed to be successful. Durability and temporarily can be entangled. Success is not easily measured as it is a highly subjective issue: success exists within a given context bound by its time and place and cannot be imposed.



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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter- ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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