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DOSSIER:
ARCHDIPLOMAS
THAT LOOK FOR
COLLECTIVE
MEMORY

MONUMENTS, MEMORIES AND
THE FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

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in conversation with Anousheh Kehar,
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WK: The more controversial monuments are often embodiments of historical violence, so it's no coincidence that the response to them also involves violence, symbolic and actual. The installation of a counter-monument then becomes an act of political self-empowerment. This is particularly clear in the debate around the Confederate monuments and their enduring baleful presence in Southern cities. What they commemorate, the official historicisation of the moment, ought to be quite different. But rather than marking the end of slavery, they heroise the outcome of the Civil War from the perspective of the losing side. The Confederate monuments are expressions of maximum power, but the power, and resentment, of the defeated. How can this anomaly be explained?

CK: I think the answer lies in the very last part of your question. You have to look more closely at the perception of the war in the Southern secessionist states. They were defeated, but in the decades after (and still today) they and their supporters referred to the war as the 'Lost Cause'.

This implies they were fighting for a just cause but were overwhelmed by the violence of the dominant Northern states. The sense of self-righteousness is not only expressed in the monuments but perpetuated in many other forms of social violence and continuing exploitation. In the South, the principle of social order is based on centuries-old beliefs. The line of argument begins with the claim that there is no class system in America, but that all whites are free. This freedom and the principle of equality enshrined in the 1776 constitution – ‘all men are created equal’ – is defined in opposition to the captive status of Blacks, who are enslaved and in that sense are not even considered human. Defeat in the Civil War did nothing to dent this belief among politicians and dominant groups in Southern society. And while they may have been prevented from systematically applying this old model, they have constantly found new ways of implementing it in practice. For example, the moment slavery was abolished a new system of forced labour, the ‘convict lease system’, was introduced. Newly criminalised people, such as vagrants, were hired out by the state to commercial enterprises. The racist system will always find a way to adapt the white supremacist ideology to changing conditions.

ML: Most of the monuments were not erected immediately after the Civil War, but later, in the Jim Crow era – indeed, a large number appeared during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It’s distressing to think that the purpose of

these monuments was not only to commemorate a perceived noble ‘Lost Cause’ but also to say to the Black population: you may have been emancipated, but you’re still not free. There were racial segregation laws in force in the Southern states right up to the time of the civil rights movement, so the monuments had the function of signalling the continuing oppression, which was evident in the mass incarceration that began immediately after the Reconstruction, for example, or the Black Wall Street massacre in Tulsa. So could it be said that the oppression also endured on a symbolic level?

CK: Yes, most definitely, although the symbolic oppression asserted by a statue in a public space cannot be viewed in isolation from the real-life political and legal oppression enacted through physical violence and economic exploitation. The convict lease system, for example, is extremely perfidious, in that it not only metes out harsh punishment to mostly harmless, innocent people, but also markets, capitalises on this violence. Rather than being locked up, people are rented out to commercial mines or agricultural concerns, and from a Southern perspective this continues to guarantee the supposed right to uncompensated labour. These different levels are strongly intertwined, making them both extremely effective and extremely persistent. Of course, you also have to bear in mind that the economic model of the Southern states is based on the principle of a plantation colony. With fewer economic options than states in the North or West of the USA, they

have a strong incentive to find inventive ways of perpetuating the system of exploitation.

AK: The street is the main space for action against monuments, as we see not just from the USA but from recent protests in Vienna, such as the projection of the Palestinian flag onto the Federal Chancellery. What role do you think space plays in memorialising history and protest actions?

CK: There's a relation between political action on the street and other forms of political protest, some of them more successful than others. The recent violent actions against monuments in the USA follow decades of failed attempts to change both the form of memorials and the system of policing in other ways. Political negotiations and reform movements have achieved little of consequence. The police are just as racist as before and the monuments are still in public space. It's only recently that things have begun to change, though I should say that it's much easier and quicker to take down monuments than it is to secure lasting reform of the apparatus of policing. The activism of the last few years – not only in the USA, but also in Belgium, for example, targeting the monuments to King Leopold II – is part of a much longer struggle to bring about change, find new forms. And the attacks on monuments can ultimately act as a spur for political decisions at both the city and the state levels. At least a hundred problematic memorials have recently been removed, without being toppled by activists.

ML: There are differences between the situation in Europe and the USA. What you had in America was more of an internal civil war than an ethnic and religious conflict of the kind fought in the 1990s in the Balkans, for example. It was also not like World War II, when an alliance of different nations fought together to defeat the Axis powers. In the USA, it was a single population fighting with and against each other. And perhaps this has played into the duplicitous approach to the history of the American South. On the one hand, you have the promoters of these racist ideologies ensuring they are made manifest, perpetuated symbolically, through monuments, but the other tactic is to downplay the significance of the events – to claim, for example, that the war was not racially motivated, but should be seen as part of the nation's cultural history. It's double-dealing, and deeply dishonest.

CK: What I find even more interesting, or disturbing, is how the US culture industry has, in just a few decades, effectively repressed the whole of American history – the history of slavery and racial oppression, segregation and lynching – so the majority of Americans actually believe that everyone in this land has access to the same opportunities. The good old days are idealised, romanticised, glorified in thousands of films and other productions. Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again' is a straightforward invocation of this glorified history. It appeals to a nostalgia for a time when everything was

apparently in order. The American belief in freedom and equality is maintained, even though American history proves – incontrovertibly – that it’s an illusion. As mentioned earlier, in the Civil War Americans fought Americans and hundreds of thousands of people died. Despite this, the desire for reconciliation and unity soon reasserted itself, along with the need to work together. The Reconstruction era opened up many political opportunities for the emancipated Blacks, but from the perspective of the Southern states, it was a time of subjugation by the North. In response to this external rule, they gave concrete form to their own ideology.

WK: What happens to the monuments that have been taken down?

CK: There are many different ways of dealing with them. For example, the J Marion Sims memorial in New York’s Central Park, honouring a gynaecologist who carried out experiments on enslaved women, has been moved to the cemetery where he is buried. A public monument has become a private tombstone. In other cases, monuments are relocated to museums where they’re contextualised, or commented on. But there’s also a commercial market for these statues, with private buyers willing to offer a great deal of money for them.

WK: When a monument is taken into private ownership, we lose the collective memory

associated with it. However terrible or disturbing the monument’s subject matter, it still bears witness to history. When it disappears into a private collection, a piece of history disappears too. Do these monuments really belong in a museum, where they could be put into the proper context? A case in point is the Lueger Monument in Vienna. Is it important for the statue to remain in place, its history explained, or could it be moved to a museum?

CK: In my opinion, museums don’t yet have enough experience in contextualising a monument that has been removed from the public realm – though in principle I believe that if a museum fulfils its remit to provide a critical, grounded perspective on history, art and culture, then it can be a place for reframing an object like that. I’m just not sure it’s the only place where this can be done. For example, the Commission set up by the City of New York has proved a useful means of taking stock and assessing specific situations. It’s not only a retrospective instrument – applied only after a monument is toppled – but a prospective one for a city, for a diverse community, as it’s investigating who exactly is using these public spaces, what kind of symbolic politics are associated with a particular place, and so on. This also applies to things like street names. I do think that questions like this need to be discussed on a much broader basis. The USA is more progressive than Europe when it comes to ensuring diversity and representation of the various sections of the population on

commissions of this kind. Cities bring together different populations, each with its own history and experiences and differing needs and demands in relation to that history, whether it's staged in a museum or another kind of public space. Take Donaupark in Vienna, for example, where you can find hundreds of memorials put up by the most diverse advocacy groups. You have these zones where suddenly many things seem possible, in a way that simply doesn't happen elsewhere in the city.

Regarding the Lueger Monument, I remain convinced that the most effective solution would be to shift its meaning through an artistic intervention, for example by re-setting it at an angle, as was proposed in a competition entry. It's not always productive to erase a relic of history. You could take down the statue of Lueger, but then you'd have to move onto the next one in the long list of historically problematic figures and do the same. I'm not sure whether removing them all is really the best solution. Perhaps it speaks of a problematic view of history that is not overly concerned to engage with the conditions of knowledge at a certain point in time, in a certain place, in a certain discourse.

WK: The example you just gave – of tilting the statue – also involves a reconfiguration of the existing monument that will change the way it is read by later generations. Today we can know a monument in both its old and its reworked forms, but in future it may not be so easy to tell where

the original ends and the intervention begins. By contrast, the museum has the duty to preserve the essence of things. Is this a contradiction?

CK: I don't believe that the museum always can – or should – preserve something in its current state. As soon as you put an object in a museum, you're extracting it from its context. And when an object is displayed alongside other objects in the museum, it acquires a different meaning than when it's standing in an urban space. You could draw a parallel with the requirement, in building conservation, to make any addition to a historic structure transparent, to show the process of transformation.

WK: There's still a lively debate around that approach, which is based on the 1964 Venice Charter. Advocates of the opposing view say the division doesn't have to be so clear cut, and that we should be open to a greater degree of continuity when intervening in a historic structure, but also allow for ambivalent or hybrid relations between old and new. The debate is multi-layered and has to take account of the building in question; as with monuments, it's very difficult to imagine a one-size-fits-all solution. In this context, it's also interesting to think about the idea of intentional neglect. You can critique or even destroy monuments by letting them decay, as with the Nazi party rally grounds in Nuremberg by Albert Speer, which are preserved in a relative state of disrepair, or the partisan monuments in the former Yugoslavia, which seem

increasingly to be falling apart, in a controlled way, their maintenance being either inadequate or non-existent.

CK: I feel I don't have the necessary background knowledge to give a specific answer on the Nazi party rally grounds, but I could talk about another example of a historically burdened monument, this time in Vienna. The monument to Josef Weinheber, which was only erected in the 1970s, commemorates a Nazi poet who wrote paeans to Hitler. It stands on Schillerplatz, directly in front of the Academy of Fine Arts. Of course, it wasn't the academy that commissioned it, but the poet's appreciation society in concert with the city authorities. Plattform Geschichtspolitik, a group of students and teachers from the Academy of Fine Arts, tried again and again to have this monument removed or at least to raise awareness of the problem. And time and time again the city defended the status quo; in fact, it even gave the monument a more massive plinth. But two years ago, an agreement was reached: the monument remains in place, but its underground foundation has been unearthed. In this way you can see these different processes running in parallel – the critical engagement with history, the attempt to address the problem, but also the excavation of the monument's cast concrete base, which exposes the full extent of its support – its defences. Given this, I find it hard to imagine that highly controversial monuments like the Lueger memorial can or will simply be dismantled. The question here is how we

engage with our history and if the solution is just to let these things fall apart, what kind of answer is that?

WK: If we reconfigure the monuments, skew them on their base, for example, then we also have to look after them – in other words, we have to maintain problematic memorials like the Lueger statue in perpetuity. That's an issue for both us and for future generations.

CK: This brings to mind a Nazi sculpture on a municipal housing complex in Vienna, which Marie Therese Litschauer reconfigured with an artistic intervention. Personally, I'd find it a shame if it were to be removed. It's the presence of these relics, their visibility to passers-by in the city, that leads to a greater awareness and engagement with the subject. The discussion in the USA has shown us how a movement becomes mobilised in society. Not every monument will or should stand in its original form forever. I think that a certain dynamic has been created, driving processes that are able to achieve democratically based, participatory, reasonable solutions and decisions. Now the bigger issue, in one sense, is how to involve the widest possible range of advocacy groups, the most diverse population groups. Judging by the events of the past year especially, it's going to be a challenge to strike the right balance between maintaining the momentum of the movement and engaging many different voices.

Dossier

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