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# Anti-fascism: The Missing Monuments

**Cristina Buta and Charles Esche**

## On colonialism and the Holocaust: A separation and a proposition

In the twenty-first century, and at least since Documenta 11, as the first truly global, postcolonial Documenta edition curated by Okwui Enwezor in 2002,<sup>1</sup> the European art scene has been called to address the history of European colonialism with a greater sense of urgency than ever before – a demand not unrelated to the capacity of former colonial subjects to give voice to their own histories, and the intellectual power of decolonial thinking originating in Latin America. Our aim in this article is to link the decolonial to anti-fascism, arguing for a broader front in favour of social justice.<sup>2</sup> Our impetus has been the difficulty of pulling together the parameters of a question that would require a much more extensive investigation - namely, the relation between the Holocaust and colonialism in European self-understanding and why this relation is not being explored consistently in European art, and especially public art. Behind this question also lies a more polemical assumption: that the separation of Holocaust and (anti)colonial memorialisation has served European interests, extending their global hegemony. In rejecting the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis as the ultimate ‘evil’ while taking a more ‘nuanced’ approach to colonial expropriation, European colonial nations have been able to sustain the idea of a not-so-bad, universally relevant, cultural modernity – an idea that became useful to them in the reconstruction period after 1945. However, the complex (and evolving) geopolitics since the end of the Cold War in 1989, combined with the aggressive economic forces of neoliberalism that have created new

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<sup>1</sup> We also note also the preceding Documenta 10, 21 June - 28 September 1997, curated by Catherine David, which started looking at the peripheries of Western modernity in relation to the post-1989 world order.

<sup>2</sup> See definitions given by Walter D. Mignolo in *Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto, Transmodernity*, Fall 2011, pp 44-66, for example: ‘The decolonial turn is the opening and the freedom from the thinking and the forms of living (economies-other, political theories-other) [...] ; the de-linking from the spell of the rhetoric of modernity, from its imperial imaginary [...]’, p 48.

forms of exchange between colonised and coloniser, but also the increasing adoption of decolonial thinking – at least in art and academic circles – jeopardises the maintenance of this convenient distinction.<sup>3</sup> This article therefore suggests that a genuine embrace of the decolonial as a subject of artistic enquiry would require new kinds of monuments and museum interventions forging a connection of the Holocaust to colonialism so as to re-invest with new meaning the European cry of ‘Never again!’, originally a response to historical fascism. We are not, of course, suggesting that art alone could transform public consciousness – this would require revised school curricula, the mainstreaming of presently marginalised media discourses, a political will vested in institutions and counterpublics, and much more. Yet we see art as a territory defined by experimental practices where blind spots can be made visible, scrutinised, and speculatively connected to what remains hidden but makes a claim to being voiced.

In discussing a selection of art monuments, memorials and artistic interventions in several countries mainly from Western Europe, we wish to encourage the further and more intense investigation of the state of the ‘historic West’ and its coming to terms with its long, ignominious history of genocide and industrial-scale labour exploitation from at least the sixteenth century onwards. From the geography of the coloniser and the perpetrator, we set out to understand how artists have reflected on different national colonial pasts that cover wide geographical zones and time periods and that have commonly been viewed in isolation from one another. Defined as the ‘darker’ side of European modernity by Walter D. Mignolo, 500 years of colonialism shares much of its basic ideology with twentieth-century fascism. While, as we shall see, the most significant postcolonial writers have often linked the two, the way they have been memorialised in public is quite different.<sup>4</sup> As our main examples we have chosen Hans Haacke’s commissioned memorial *And You Were Victorious After All* (1988) in Graz, Austria, and Esther and Jochen Gerz’s ‘vanishing’ *Monument against Fascism* (1986) in Hamburg, Germany, both of which implicated a language of anti-monuments in response to the Holocaust and both predating the grander and more formal Holocaust memorials of the early 2000s in metropolitan spaces including Berlin and Vienna. In a similar manner, we would suggest that recent examples of works addressing a much longer

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<sup>3</sup> In 1997, and in the context of Documenta 10, Catherine David was already noting: ‘In reality, the ‘new world disorder’ commenced in the 1970s with the oil shock and the transition to what the geographer David Harvey describes as an economy of ‘flexible accumulation’. Nonetheless, it is 1989 that symbolically marks the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era of ‘hot wars’, in Gunter Grass’s phrase. The visible division of the world into two blocs has been replaced by a complex network of exchanges in which American hegemony is relativized by the European Union and the rising power of East Asia, while the future remains uncertain for the former USSR, China, and most of the Arab, Muslim, and African countries. In Europe, the globalization of markets exacerbates the economic and social dysfunctions brought on by the crisis of what Etienne Balibar calls ‘the national social state’ that developed after the war; the result is an upsurge of nationalism and identity fixations.’ See ‘Introduction by Catherine David in the Short Guide’, [http://universes-in-universe.de/doc/e\\_press.htm](http://universes-in-universe.de/doc/e_press.htm), accessed 15 April 2019

<sup>4</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011, pp 1-27

legacy of European colonialism - such as Petra Bauer and Annette Krause's contribution to the exhibition *Be(com)ing Dutch* at the Van Abbemuseum (2007 - 2008) and Quinsy Gario's activist art project *Zwarte Piet is Racisme* (2011- ongoing) can be seen as prefigurative of a coming monumentalising process; specifically, a monumentalising process that is developing in response to decolonial thinking and that begins to openly acknowledge the crimes of colonialism in the public spaces of European cities.<sup>5</sup>

A discussion on the potential of art to play a role in anti-fascist thinking and an anti-fascist imaginary seems to us timely at a political juncture when a white backlash seeks to marginalise critical debates and re-assert the old order, if not explicitly in the name of National Socialism (though this does happen too), then in supremacy discourses displaying and updating insidious aspects of the former. This 'white anger' often responds to, and amplifies, contemporary racist hate, yet its roots lie deep and it often defends colonial traditions or refuses to acknowledge the impact of Europe's colonial past on contemporary migration. We propose that the making of anti-fascist art today needs therefore to draw together narratives that make apparent the missing links between these two histories of racial hatred (the Holocaust and colonialism) in an effort to show that fascism, far from being merely a nominal reference in the contemporary political landscape, is significantly legitimised through a process of compartmentalising European history.

## The contemporary moment in perspective

Before engaging with our selection of artworks, it is necessary to set out the existing discourse around the similarities or differences between the Holocaust and colonialism. As we have said, in revisiting this intellectual history today, we wish to stress that relating colonialism to systemic anti-Semitism in Europe might serve the struggle against a reviving fascism in the twenty-first century. Understanding the nature of the discourse of 'othering' at the core of both colonialism and anti-Semitism positions the nature of 'fascism' or white/Aryan supremacy as not only a historical occurrence of the 1920s-30s, defining the twentieth century, but as a continuously irrupting tendency in European politics evident since the onset of modern colonialism.

The relation between the Holocaust and colonialism is fraught with the burdens of both past and present. The dictum 'Never again!' that became the response of a generation to World War II was never extended beyond Nazi crimes and twentieth-century fascism(s) to address the whole

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, Denmark built its first public statue of a black woman, entitled 'I Am Queen Mary' in 2018, an imposing and empowering 23-feet tall statue depicting a female leader inspired by Mary Thomas who led the largest labor revolt in 1878 against Danish colonial rule in Frederiksted, St. Croix.

infrastructure of European white and patriarchal supremacy that established the premises within which Nazism flourished. Scholars, critics and writers, including Franz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre and Aimé Césaire have stressed the connection between colonialism (or its twin, imperialism) and Nazism.<sup>6</sup> Others, such as Charles Meier, Alain Finkielkraut or Bernhard Schlink, warn of a dangerous competition between the Holocaust and other past crimes and of the excessive focus on memory.<sup>7</sup> While we would never want to deny the devastating tragedy of the Holocaust and can agree that an excessive focus on the past can be limiting if excluding attention to the present, we would also contend that Western European states have not engaged in a process of acknowledging, addressing, and remembering colonial suffering to anything like the same extent.<sup>8</sup> We note the case of Portugal, which, by the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, saw its first attempt to commemorate its long history of slavery through a memorial to the millions of its victims; at the time of writing, the memorial remains unbuilt and undesigned, despite Lisbon residents having voted for it to be erected.<sup>9</sup>

While Nazi Germany has rightly been used as a historic example of outright evil, the slave trade is often publicly discussed in less condemnatory or more ambivalent or confusing terms.<sup>10</sup> Overall, colonialism is often seen in Europe (and possibly more so in the self-assured UK) as a mixed blessing for the colonised and has rarely been regarded as having played a decisive role in Europe's ongoing global economic and social advantages. There has, for instance, been no process of 'decolonialisation' in Western Europe in the same way as an incomplete process of 'de-Nazification' was carried out in Western Germany. The concept of 'Eurafrica' became implicated in the legitimisation of the ongoing colonial exploitation of the African continent post-1945 and was fundamental to the foundation of the European Union. It is in such examples where we can observe the lack of political will to connect the dots of European history. The mere fact of European re-

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<sup>6</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, London, Pluto Press, 1967, p 33; Jean-Paul Sartre, Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier, *Reflections on the Jewish Question, A Lecture*, October, Vol 87, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1999, pp 32-46; Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1972, p 14

<sup>7</sup> Alain Finkielkraut, *L'interminable écriture de l'extermination*, Paris, Broche, 2010, p 8: 'The Shoah is present everywhere, and it arouses the envy of the descendants of slaves and the formerly colonized. More and more are those who demand, not that the slave trade of Africans and colonial expansionism be better known and taught, but that they be better known and taught as a Shoah, in the name of the equality of the victims. It is therefore a question not of shedding more light on crimes other than Auschwitz, than of stamping the seal of Auschwitz on these crimes.'

<sup>8</sup> More than 50 monuments and memorials dedicated to the Holocaust exist just in France, for example. See <http://www.jewishwikipedia.info/museums.html>, accessed 10 February 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See 'James Badcock, 'Slavery memorial highlights Portugal's racism taboo', *BBC News*, 29 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-44965631>, accessed 10 February 2019.

<sup>10</sup> There are many examples, including Kanye West's recent outburst: 'When you hear about slavery for 400 years. For 400 years? That sounds like a choice'. Interestingly, he then went on to say: 'I like the word prison because slavery goes too direct to the idea of blacks. Slavery is to blacks as the Holocaust is to Jews. Prison is something that unites as one race, blacks and whites, that we're the human race.' See Kanye West, Benjamin Lee and Ben Beaumont-Thomas, 'Kanye West on Slavery: 'For 400 years? That Sounds like a Choice'', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/may/01/kanye-west-on-slavery-for-400-years-that-sounds-like-a-choice>, accessed 11 February 2019.

colonisation attempts in the former colonies after 1945 points to the failure to link white supremacy to fascism in the minds of governing elites and, by extension, in the dominant ideology that has shaped public discourse.<sup>11</sup> Western Europe's (purposeful) blindness to such links is reflected in its culture of monuments where 'the monumental commemorations of empire are all messy and conflicted, perhaps mirroring the uncertainties of a post-colonial age and mindset.'<sup>12</sup> Aligning colonialism with the Holocaust would therefore break through the perceived ambivalence towards, or even outright denial of, Europe's exploitative history that informs the rise of neo-fascism in Europe and would undermine the tendency in Western European culture to position the Holocaust as the singular unrepeatable tragedy in our shared history. It would also undermine the reliability of an underlying European reasoning according to which colonialism remains a marginal event in the development of Europe.

As we have noted, a process of rethinking is partly underway, with colonial history migrating from being 'the non-acknowledged centre in the making of modern Europe' to it claiming a more central place in recent artistic and curatorial concerns.<sup>13</sup> However, even if a modicum of progress can be observed in Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century, mainly in the form of discussion and debate, this rarely pierces through to actual structural change. Taking the Netherlands as an example, we could note that the ethics of the Dutch East Indies Company were still being praised by the government in 2008, but that colonial monuments have added or rewritten interpretation panels, such as that of the statue of the colonial occupier of Banda Island, Jan Pieterszoon Coen, in Hoorn. The naming of an art centre in Rotterdam after colonial navy officer Witte Corneliszoon de With sparked debate in 2017 but brought no resolution; and while €5.6 million was promised for a new National Holocaust Museum, there have been significant cuts to the budgets of the former Colonial Institute (now Tropenmuseum) and other ethnographic and colonial collections. Yet, despite being inconsistent and marked by discontinuity, the move towards acknowledging the enduring presence of European colonialism in museums and art institutions is a fact, and not only in the Netherlands. We would maintain that this history and also neo-colonial forms of global and national relations constitute one of the most crucial issues in negotiating Europe's shared past and present. The links to the Holocaust could make the arguments all the more pointed and serve to animate the urgency of 'Never again!' while also clarifying what is at stake in

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<sup>11</sup> Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism*, London, Bloomsbury Academics, 2014, pp 3-5

<sup>12</sup> Robert Aldrich, *Commemorating Colonialism in a Post-Colonial World*, E-Rea 10.1, *Histoires de l'oubli*, 2012, pp 5-6, <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/2803>, accessed 12 February 2019

<sup>13</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, 7-8, 2009, pp 159-181, here p 174; the focus on indigeneity in Documenta 14, 2017; works by artists who have come to prominence over the past five years such as Kader Attia, Sonia Boyce, Patricia Kaersenhout, Naem Mohaiemen, The Otolith Group and others are all evidence of this development.

the rise of far-right populism, especially when it seeks to avoid an association with fascism – an association that still remains too tainted to be revived wholesale.

## Colonialism and the Holocaust – a parallel analysis

As an injunction to the German and European post-1945 generation, the famous dictum ‘Never again!’ presented National Socialism as an exception never to be repeated and the Holocaust as a unique event in history.<sup>14</sup> Yet the argument has been made that Nazism (or National Socialism) was ‘a colonial system in the very heart of Europe’ and ‘European colonialism brought home to Europe’ and so, ultimately, should be seen as a logical successor to European white supremacist ideologies.<sup>15</sup> The events of European imperialism contributed to the creation of conditions in which the Holocaust became ‘thinkable and executable’, while the ‘bio-political techniques enacted on colonial populations returned as a boomerang to Europe in the Holocaust.’<sup>16</sup> The argument, which came to be known as ‘the boomerang effect’, was made by political theorist Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Arendt claimed that colonialism and imperialism contributed to the erosion of the modern nation-state and cultivated ideologies of racial difference and political practices of exclusion which later circulated back to Europe. While concentrating on the Holocaust as her reference point, Arendt was also making a broader claim about the frantic nature of expansion during the late-nineteenth century, paralleled by the fear among European nations of losing control or even being attacked by the colonised territories.<sup>17</sup> However, Arendt did not address other genocides or the effects of colonialism on colonised countries in her analysis, which led to subsequent criticisms concerning a ‘certain ethnocentrism, which meant that she valorized the sufferings of the Jews over earlier genocides.’<sup>18</sup>

During philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s first visit to America, African-American novelist Richard Wright mentioned the following quote to him: ‘There is no black problem; there is a white

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<sup>14</sup> Nele De Coninck, *Intersecting Memories of the Holocaust and Colonialism: Caryl Phillips’s The Nature of Blood and André Schwarz-Bart’s La Mulâtresse Solitude*, Ghent, Universiteit Gent, 2009, pp 9-10

<sup>15</sup> R. C. Young, *White Mythologies*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, p 39

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p 39; J. Zimmerer, ‘The Birth of the Ostland out of the Spirit of Colonialism’, in Dirk Moses and Dan Stone, eds, *Colonialism and Genocide*, London and New York, Routledge, 2007, p 115; Walter D. Mignolo, *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Cleveland and New York, Meridian Books, 1958, pp 131-134

<sup>18</sup> Richard H. King and Dan Stone, eds, *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nationalism, Race and Genocide*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2007, p 233; Arendt was also rightfully criticised for her racist views and her failure to understand issues of anti-black racism and segregation in the 1960 US context. For this critique see Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt, Liberalism, and Racism: Controversies Concerning Violence, Segregation and Education*, *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 47 (S1), 2009, pp 53-60

problem.’<sup>19</sup> The words are said to have inspired Sartre to write the essay *Reflections on the Jewish Question* (1946).<sup>20</sup> The quote captures the very idea of a common ground between anti-Semitism and black racism; being at heart ‘a white problem’, or in other words, a problem that white people have.<sup>21</sup> Anti-Semitism was based, according to Sartre, on the mindsets of a certain group of people from Western European society at the end of the eighteenth century, a group fearful of its right to privilege being taken away, a privilege resting on an ancient myth of the nation and on the desire for property. This mindset was characterised by binary thinking and an inability to perceive universalism in any other terms than those introduced by such binary thinking. For these reasons, Sartre rightfully points out the irrelevance of bringing democratic arguments to Nazis in the hope of demonstrating the illogical and unfounded grounds of anti-Semitism. There is a similar logic in colonial thinking going back to the father of Enlightenment philosophy. In his *Observations* (1764), Immanuel Kant retells the story of a certain Father Labat:

Father Labat reports that a Negro carpenter, whom he reproached for haughty treatment towards his wives, answered: You whites are indeed fools, for first you make great concessions to your wives, and afterward you complain when they drive you mad. And it might be that there were something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was very black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid [...]<sup>22</sup>

While the striking misogyny of this quote cannot go uncommented, it is the refusal to acknowledge even a thoughtful comment by an African as being of any real value that makes for a clear link to anti-Semitism. Perhaps the most eloquent of the writers prepared to link colonialism and the Holocaust is the poet, author and politician Aimé Césaire. Taking up the comparison but critically pointing towards Western ignorance of colonial issues before the Holocaust took place, he writes:

People [in Europe] are surprised, they become indignant. They say: ‘How strange! But never mind – it’s Nazism, it will pass!’ And they wait, and they hope; and they hide the truth from themselves, that it is barbarism, the supreme barbarism, the crowning barbarism that sums up

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, ‘Below Even the Other: Colonialism’s Violent Legacy and Challenge to Fanon’, *The Brotherwise Dispatch*, Vol 2, Issue 14, Dec 2014 – Feb 2015, [www.brotherwisedispatch.blogspot.com/2014/12/below-even-other-colonialisms-violent.html](http://www.brotherwisedispatch.blogspot.com/2014/12/below-even-other-colonialisms-violent.html), accessed 10 February 2019

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier, op cit, p 34

<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen (Observations on the Feelings of The Beautiful and Sublime)*, California, University of California Press, 1960



all the daily barbarisms; that it is Nazism, yes, but that before they were its victims, they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it... what he [the very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century] cannot forgive Hitler for is not the crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the 'coolies' of India, and the 'niggers' of Africa.<sup>23</sup>

Césaire criticises 'the way in which the genocide of the Jews had been set apart from genocides committed against non-Western peoples with a searing attack on Western values.'<sup>24</sup> Regarding different forms of exploitation, philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon also argues that racism, or anti-Semitism, colonial or otherwise, are not different because they both rip away a person's right to feel human.<sup>25</sup>

The dangers of the political failure (or reluctance) to connect colonialism and the Holocaust can be observed in the current 'cultural' debate in the Netherlands, where the idea of the 'hard working Dutchman' returns in many Dutch rightist political speeches. This mythological being represents Dutch normality struggling against 'outsiders' of different cultures and skin colours – 'his' identity at risk of being denied the right to free speech by 'politically correct cultural Marxists'. Harsh criticism of cultural Marxists as the 'autoimmune disorder in Europe' is often accompanied by praise for the Judeo-Christian roots of Dutch society.<sup>26</sup> Yet the similarity between the 'cultural Marxist' and the older 'Judeo-Bolshevik' has been noted by a number of contemporary writers.<sup>27</sup>

It is the fear of a contemporary resurgence or even normalisation of fascist thinking under the guise of anti-immigration, Islamophobia and 'white rights' that makes the task of connecting

<sup>23</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1972, p 36

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> See the chapter 'The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples' in *Black Skin, White Masks* where Fanon argues so in response to Octave Mannoni's claim that 'colonial exploitation is not the same as other forms of exploitation, and colonial racialism is different from other kinds of racialism'. See Octave Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, New York, Praeger, 1964, pp 61-82

<sup>26</sup> Sebastiaan Faber, 'Is Dutch Bad Boy Thierry Bad Boy Thierry Baudet the New Face of the European Alt-Right?' *The Nation*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/is-dutch-bad-boy-thierry-baudet-the-new-face-of-the-european-alt-right/>, accessed 27 Nov 2018

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Moyn, 'The Alt Right's Favourite Meme Is 100 Years Old', *The New York Times*, 13 November 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/opinion/cultural-marxism-anti-semitism.html>, accessed 15 February 2019; see also Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe, The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism*, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 2018

past crimes to current thinking urgent. In proposing art as a paradigm where the ‘binary encoding of the world’ – the idea at the heart of both Nazi and colonial rule – can be challenged, we acknowledge our partiality but consider the need to energise the ‘Never again!’ imperative as a responsibility on curators and art historians. To do so effectively in the current political climate, we need to understand this imperative as a call to critique a politics broader than National Socialism – a politics that refuses to contemplate the emergence of such integral dualisms as civilised/uncivilised, and human/subhuman which has provided the justification for the detachment of the perpetrator from the cruel reality of his (sic) actions. We seek therefore to place art within practices that contribute to ‘the unveiling of epistemic silences of Western epistemology and affirming the epistemic rights of the racially devalued.’<sup>28</sup> In considering artistic responses to the Holocaust and colonialism, we want to further explore how, through visual forms and nuanced ways of constructing and representing complex arguments, we might help bring forth a new public discourse on ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ – coming to terms with the past – across Western Europe.

## Art responses

How then have reflections on the Holocaust and/or colonialism manifested themselves in the artistic sphere? We can begin with French artist Christian Boltanski, in whose work the Holocaust is a constant, looming presence. As someone from the post-1945 generation, he understands that his work bears wider implications but cannot let go of the exceptionalism of the Holocaust. As he stated in an interview with Georgia Marsh in 1989: ‘My art is not about camps. It is after the camps. The reality of the Occident was changed by the Holocaust. You can no longer see anything without seeing that. But my work is really not about the Holocaust, it’s about death in general, about all of our deaths’.<sup>29</sup> Yael Bartana’s video – *Tashlikh (Cast Off)* (2017) provides a counter-example, informed perhaps by her Israeli upbringing and being of a later generation. Her work presents us with perpetrators and survivors of various genocides or ethnic persecutions – the Holocaust, the Armenian Genocide, as well as Sudanese and Eritrean ethnic cleansing or civil wars, and includes the European refugee crisis.<sup>30</sup> The video takes its title from the Jewish custom of casting bread or other objects into a river in a symbolic act of relinquishing sins, a movement repeated in the film. Through this ‘rain’ curtain of symbolic objects, the video connects private belongings to past experiences of war and suffering. Bartana’s work generates a new ritual that consists of the

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<sup>28</sup> J. Zimmerer, op cit, p 107; Walter D. Mignolo, op cit, p 162

<sup>29</sup> Georgia Marsh. ‘The White and the Black: An Interview with Christian Boltanski’, *Parkett*, vol 22, 1989, pp 36-42, here p 39

<sup>30</sup> See <http://yaelbartana.com/project/tashlikh#info>, accessed 5 February 2019.

deliberate discarding of objects – from the Holocaust concentration camp uniform, to Sudanese and Eritrean garments, a prosthetic leg or a refugee vest – as a means of psychological liberation.



Yael Bartana, "Tashlikh (Cast Off)", 2017. one channel video and sound installation, 11 min, courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery, Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, Capitain Petzel, Berlin, Petzel Gallery, New York, and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan. © Yael Bartana

By assembling and representing different genocides, including the current refugee crisis, within this video, Bartana addresses them equally as well as fosters a sense of collective grief, acceptance and ultimately release from the past. Hers is a very recent work, but one which fulfils some of the hopes of this article: namely, that now is the time to build a common front against contemporary fascism through ceasing to deal with the Holocaust as unquestionably exceptional.

However, the ever-present limitation of such works is that they stay within the controlled environment of the museum or even commercial gallery. As with all so-called 'autonomous' art, the descriptor is a measure not only of a certain freedom of expression but also of possible isolation and irrelevance to broader social and political discussions. In the contemporary art paradigm, public art is often seen as one of the ways to circumvent this marginalisation and is therefore perhaps a more fruitful place to look for the potential for artists to make their presence felt in the general call to resist neo-fascism.

Concerning art and the Holocaust, we see that there are numerous artworks, including works made during World War II, that directly document the horrors of the Shoah, though it has to be

added that finding an appropriate language of representation has often been a struggle.<sup>31</sup> Tied to narratives of nationhood and the reconstruction of a European identity after World War II, the Holocaust is remembered much later through memorials, museums and institutions in Europe that commemorate this ‘traumatic memory’.<sup>32</sup> Some monuments have become emblematic, such as the famous Holocaust Tower situated in the Jewish Museum in Berlin and designed by architect Daniel Libeskind; or the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin designed by architects Peter Eisenman and Buro Happold. Both were built in the twenty-first century (the first in 2001 and the second in 2005). In Western and Central Europe, monuments and memorials to the Holocaust appear in key countries including Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, France, and Poland. Here, it is important to point out that the majority of these monuments were commissioned and erected in the last thirty years rather than soon after the events they mark.

With the notable exception of the 1948 Ghetto Monument in Warsaw by Nathan Rapoport – a work heavily criticised for not making ‘something appropriate’ to the memory of the Holocaust – it was in the 1980s that the discussion, especially in Germany, returned to the crimes of World War II and how to preserve the (at least) public rejection of National Socialism achieved by the post-war generation.<sup>33</sup> Artists in Hamburg, Kassel and Berlin started to make ‘vanishing’ monuments. The so-called movement of counter-monuments in Germany arose from, among other things, a fear on the part of artists that monuments to the Holocaust existed to enable historical amnesia; or that monuments have acted as apologies that allow nations to inscribe the trauma of the Holocaust into the depths of a history that, once forgotten, would not be so difficult to repeat.

One of the ‘vanishing’ monuments was Esther and Jochen Gerz’s *Monument against Fascism* (1986), for which they invited residents and visitors to Hamburg’s Harburg suburb to sign their names onto a twelve-meter lead column as a call to ‘remain vigilant’. As each of the one-and-a-half-meter surfaces of the four-sided column was covered with engravings and hammerings, it was lowered into the ground. In 1993, the column disappeared completely. As the artists’ text, written in seven languages, explained: ‘In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.’<sup>34</sup> By engraving, gouging and chiselling messages, opinions and commentaries, members of the public engaged with the dynamics of the project. The monument came at the initiative of the city of Hamburg which, in 1979, amidst fears of the rise of neo-Nazism, set out to create a public

<sup>31</sup> Brett Ashley Kaplan, ‘“Aesthetic Pollution”: The Paradox of Remembering and Forgetting in Three Holocaust Commemorative Sites’, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 2, 1, 2003, pp 1-18

<sup>32</sup> R. van der Laarse, ‘Archaeology of Memory: Europe’s Holocaust Dissonances in East and West’, EAC occasional paper 7, Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam, 2013, pp 121-130

<sup>33</sup> James E. Young, ‘The Biography of a Memorial Icon: Nathan Rapoport’s Warsaw Ghetto Monument’, *Representations* 26, special issue Memory and Counter-Memory, 1989, pp 69-106

<sup>34</sup> Laura Cottingham, ‘The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History’, *Frieze* 17, June 1994, <https://frieze.com/article/art-memory-holocaust-memorials-history>, accessed 1 March 2019



dialogue around the construction of a monument against fascism. Another anti-monument that ‘vanished’ was Hans Haacke’s commissioned memorial *And You Were Victorious after All* (1988), in Graz, Austria. A temporary art installation, Haacke's project recreated a Nazi victory column that had been erected over a public statue in 1938, when Hitler honoured Graz as an early Nazi stronghold, calling it the ‘City of the People's Insurrection’. Haacke's memorial, installed in the original site, included an additional text that commemorated those killed locally by the Nazis. Nearby, sixteen posters inscribed with ‘Graz - City of the People's Insurrection’ featured facsimiles of pro-Aryan and anti-Semitic documents that Haacke culled from local newspaper reports, classified ads, and university course listings printed in 1938. The documents were pasted in the centre of a swastika on each poster. As Haacke recalled, there were reactions from the media and people of all ages.<sup>35</sup> While most people of retirement age were enraged, several passionate supporters and local TV supported the idea that they must confront and come to terms with their ugly past. In their opening address, both the mayor of Graz and the deputy governor stressed the need for more education about recent history. They also stated that any exhibition of art in public places bears political connotations. In the midst of all this public discussion, Haacke's piece was firebombed by neo-Nazis on November 2, 1988, a week prior to the exhibition closing.



<sup>35</sup> See Haacke’s full statement at <http://foundation.generali.at/en/collection/artist/haacke-hans/artwork/und-ihr-habt-doch-gesiegt.html?nomobile=1#.XH-RhohKjiU>, accessed 5 March 2019

Hans Haacke, “Und Ihr habt doch gesiegt” [And you were victorious after all], installation views at the Styrian Autumn Festival, Marienplatz, Graz (1988). Courtesy the Artist. Photography by Angelika Gradwohl. (Copyright TBC; also awaiting a smaller photo of the Haacke’s poster which goes together with this one)

These two projects from the 1980s constitute successful examples of artistic monuments that self-consciously avoid their own decline into irrelevance while provoking different – wanted and unwanted – forms of participation. Gerz’s project remains as documentation in public space that reminds passers-by of what was lost and is no longer accessible. Haacke’s work could be seen as a method of over-identification, and its straightforward use of the same aesthetics as Nazism could only be provocative to all sides.<sup>36</sup> The way that both works address absence provides intriguing possibilities for critical colonial monuments that hardly exist today. In the latter case, the absence is not only of countless murdered voices and faces in Europe’s midst; there is also a geographic divide that needs to be bridged in accessing the much longer history of colonialism.

## Towards an anti-colonial discourse of remembrance

While anti-monuments addressing the Holocaust were appearing in 1980s Germany, anti-colonial monuments were difficult to even imagine in late twentieth-century Europe. Alongside colonial exhibitions, institutes and museums, monuments were another way not to critique but disseminate the benefits of colonialism to the Western European public. Notable examples are the buildings for the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale in Paris, now the Palais de La Porte Dorée, or the many statues to imperial military conflicts and generals in London. Even the International Exhibition in post-WW2 Brussels in 1958 still celebrated the colonies and installed a ‘human zoo’ of Congolese subjects, a number of whom died in the process. Colonial monumentalism was largely celebratory well into the 1960s, after which point, the whole history was rather ignored or imagined to have become irrelevant with the official (and still incomplete) decolonisation process that began in the 1950s across Africa and the Caribbean.<sup>37</sup> From the 1960s onwards, Western

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<sup>36</sup> Here, there might be a useful comparison with the tactics of NSK in Slovenia, though this is beyond the scope of our article.

<sup>37</sup> With Britain’s declining international influence following Brexit (not actualised at the time of writing), the ongoing colonial status of Gibraltar and the Chagos Islands has again come to public attention. See Sean Bell, ‘Chagos ruling shows Britain won’t hang its 14 colonial leftovers forever’, *Common Space*, 28 February 2019,

museums and ethnographic collections finally – and slowly – began to amend the display of colonial treasures and their celebration of colonial ‘heroes’ in a process that is equally far from completion.

Benedikt Stuchtey points out that colonial sites of remembrance and their culture of monuments recall to this day the conflicts and ambivalences of European colonial rule in public memory.<sup>38</sup> Some monuments to colonial worthies were shifted to obscure locations, while others remain in public view. In France in the early 1960s, officials renamed the old colonial museum in Paris, built for the colonial exhibition in 1931, the ‘Palais de la Porte Dorée’. The names of colonial heroes were sandblasted from the side of the old Ecolé Coloniale near the Luxembourg Gardens in the 1980s. In the 1970s, unknown persons dynamited a statue of Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand from a memorial that commemorates his Congo-Nile expedition, ‘a cross-Africa trek that came head-to-head with Kitchener at Fashoda in 1898.’<sup>39</sup> The memorial, also known as ‘Monument au commandant Marchand’, is located directly outside the Palais de la Porte Dorée. Perhaps unexpectedly, the monument was subsequently restored and put back in place where it still stands. It is also notable that, after the Algerian government decided to destroy and/or remove French colonial monuments from public space, the French rescued much of the old colonial statuary in 1962, transporting dozens of war memorials and figures of colonial luminaries back to France, many eventually to be re-erected there.<sup>40</sup> Yet, most recently, in 2018, the French government issued a report calling for widespread restitution if demanded by colonial countries, and even the British Museum is temporarily willing to return some Benin bronzes to Nigeria though, so far, it refuses point blank to countenance discussion about the status of the Parthenon sculptures. In Germany, the statue of an elephant unveiled in 1932 in Bremen as a memorial to soldiers killed in war and to the lost German colonies was rebadged in 1990 as an anti-colonial monument. Six years later, Namibian President Sam Nujoma, standing alongside the Bremen mayor, unveiled a plaque in front of the elephant dedicated to the ‘Victims of German Colonial Rule in Namibia 1884-1914’.<sup>41</sup>

It should also be remembered that alongside artists there was always resistance to colonialism both in the colonies and the imperial centres. Already before World War II and as fascism was on the rise in Europe, artists (on the left) embraced and made available to the public criticisms of colonialism. For instance, the Surrealist artists led by André Thirion and Louis Aragon

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<https://www.commonspace.scot/articles/13920/analysis-chagos-ruling-shows-britain-wont-hang-its-14-colonial-leftovers-forever>, accessed 7 March 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Benedikt Stuchtey, ‘Colonialism and Imperialism, 1450–1950’, *European History Online EGO*, Institute of European History, Mainz, 201, pp 2-5, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/stuchteyb-2010-en>, accessed 10 March 2019

<sup>39</sup> See Robert Aldrich, *op cit*, p 14; The Fashoda Incident was the climax of imperial disputes between Britain and France to control Eastern Africa during the Scramble for Africa at the end of the nineteenth century.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>41</sup> Ulrich van der Heyden and Joachim Zeller, eds, *Kolonialmetropole Berlin*, Berlin, Berlin Edition, 2002, p 173

organised an ‘anti-imperial’ exhibition in 1931 where they displayed photographs and reports of labour exploitation, mistreatment of colonised people, and poverty in the colonised world. In turn, Surrealists like André Breton were influential on Aimé Césaire and on the theories that refused to see the Holocaust and colonialism as entirely separate events. These pre-Holocaust artistic projects provide us with some of the first anti-colonial protests that might be worth recovering in detail to inspire contemporary artists.

Nevertheless, monuments about colonial suffering as well as (de)colonial sites of remembrance are rarely encountered in Western European countries.<sup>42</sup> There are some important attempts by artists in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries to respond to the statues of ‘colonial heroes’ in the form of public actions and artistic interventions. In Belgium, the large equestrian statues of King Leopold II of Belgium in Brussels, Ekeren and Oostende have been subject to vandalism accompanied by public outcry and demands that the statues be taken down.<sup>43</sup> In some cases, the statue’s hand was painted red, a symbol of the atrocities committed in the Congo during the colonial exploitation conducted by King Leopold II. In September 2008, artist Théophile de Giraud climbed up the large equestrian statue to King Leopold II at the Place du Trône in Brussels and dumped red paint on Leopold’s head and upper body.<sup>44</sup> These performative public actions are at times close to acts of political vandalism. Drawing such actions within the paradigm of art is perhaps a moot point, but their heartfelt, popular, public yet rather amateurish nature indicates how most European states are unwilling to address their colonial legacy formally, and yet how resistance from diasporic communities in Europe in particular is growing. For people resident in Western Europe or moving between the North and the South, these monuments are as painful as the physical legacy of National Socialism and they are increasingly able to make their emotions heard.

The response of the white European establishment to their actions will be decisive in how European politics unfolds in the coming years, and whether fascism will once again take root. The question of how these issues are given a public platform is then crucial. Given art’s privileged access to the most disengaged sector of the public – that is, the white, largely upper-middle classes that still constitute art’s primary demographic – examples such as Yael Bartana’s work discussed earlier can be crucial in building resistance to fascism and emphasising the urgency of the situation.

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<sup>42</sup> We stress that our research concerning such public memorials is in progress and thus incomplete, and we would be happy to hear of works that are explicitly (rather than implicitly) anti-colonial.

<sup>43</sup> Sandrine Ekofo, ‘Massamoordenaars als Leopold II plaats je niet op een voetstuk’, *Knack*, 23 November 2017, <https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/massamoordenaars-als-leopold-ii-plaats-je-niet-op-een-voetstuk/article-opinion-891957.html>, accessed 15 March 2019

<sup>44</sup> Rédaction RTBF, ‘Une statue de Léopold II peinte en rouge à Bruxelles’, *RTBF.be*, 9 September 2008, <http://www.rtbf.be/info/societe/divers/une-statue-de-leopold-ii-peinte-en-rouge-a-bruxelles>, accessed 15 March 2019; Also see Robert Aldrich, *op cit*, p 6.



In a different context, the performative series of public interventions, *Demythologize That History and Put It to Rest*, initiated by Maria Carvalho in May 2018 is instructive. The series of interventions held in front of statues of two colonial figures from the late-nineteenth century – Germany’s first chancellor Otto Von Bismarck and King Carlos I from Portugal – represented a collective anti-colonial performance. Exploring notions of memory, *Demythologize That History and Put It to Rest* gathered the work of nine other artists besides Carvalho, including Christian Etongo, Kiluanji Kia Henda, Nathalie Bikoro and Angela Ferreira.<sup>45</sup> Each artist’s intervention questioned and challenged the logic of colonial power inscribed in these statues in a specific way, pluralising discontent and calling into question not only the indifference with which these statues are received in public space today, but also hopefully alleviating some of the pain of the past through disrupting the smooth surfaces of these colonial celebrations.

Such developments are also present in the Netherlands around the Zwarte Piet issue. This relatively young tradition of using blackface as a way to celebrate St Nicolas and ridicule the Afro-Dutch population is clearly racist, yet its origins and meaning are sometimes violently disputed. In 2008, Petra Bauer and Annette Krause’s work *Read the Masks: Tradition Is Not a Given* was part of the exhibition project ‘Be(com)ing Dutch’ at the Van Abbemuseum. The work sought to initiate a renewed protest against the caricature by organising a public protest march with artist-designed placards and banners. The march had to be cancelled due to threats of violence by mail and online. Instead, the artists made a film with the same title documenting the whole process of the proposal and its public rejection, tracing the origins of the blackface figure in nineteenth-century imperial Netherlands and the reactions to their own project. A few years later, Quinsy Gario, a Dutch artist with Caribbean roots, designed a t-shirt with the inscription ‘Zwarte Piet is Racisme’ (Black Peter is racism) and wore it at a protest where he was arrested for disturbing the peace. Gradually over the past ten years, opposition has grown to Zwarte Piet, making the issue a recurrent annual conflict in the Dutch media and on the streets.<sup>46</sup> In response, the defenders of Zwarte Piet have themselves become more activist and openly racist, no longer only defending a ‘children’s festival’ but seeing criticism of blackface as an attack on white, Dutch values as a whole. The issue has moved to the mainstream but not much improved in the process. In 2018, PSV football fans attacked a protest organised in Eindhoven, unfortunately fulfilling the threats made 10 years before. Yet what we

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<sup>45</sup> Gouri Sharma, ‘The art project challenging Berlin and Lisbon’s colonial leaders’, *DW Arts*, 7 May 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/the-art-project-challenging-berlin-and-lisbons-colonial-leaders/a-43683555>, accessed 15 March 2019

<sup>46</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, ‘The Dutch are slowly recognizing that their blackface tradition of Zwarte Piet is racist and weird’, *The Washington Post*, 2 October 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/02/the-dutch-are-slowly-recognizing-that-their-blackface-tradition-of-zwarte-piet-is-racist-and-weird/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.cf10c105a6b4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/02/the-dutch-are-slowly-recognizing-that-their-blackface-tradition-of-zwarte-piet-is-racist-and-weird/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cf10c105a6b4), accessed 15 March 2019

might observe here is the effectiveness of a discussion that originated in artistic circles, though the link to Dutch imperialism still needs to be more strongly emphasised in the public debate. At the same time, many Dutch people who previously took a relatively neutral stance towards Zwarte Piet must now choose sides, a development that might be seen by some as potentially exacerbating the social polarisation that benefits fascism.



Petra Bauer & Annette Krause. *Read the Masks: Tradition Is Not a Given*, 2008. Van Abbemuseum, 2008. Photo: Peter Cox

## A tentative conclusion

In the 2010s, the decolonial movement has been growing in volume and confidence.<sup>47</sup> While it has become increasingly difficult to sideline the new decolonial theories, the implications of decolonising the museum or the curriculum are profound. They touch on the holy trinity of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism that keep the modern *status quo* in place. Taking decoloniality in the art field seriously must mean a thorough and substantial repurposing of its institutions, collections and practices. Only by addressing in the broadest terms the history of

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, a survey of the decolonial movement in Ramon Grosfoguel, 'The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-economic Paradigms', *Cultural Studies*, Vol 2, March/May 2007, pp 211-223.

colonial modernity can this change find solid ground. In this process, historians, curators, and institutions may want to look again at the histories of artworks and artistic projects that address the legacies of colonialism, the Holocaust and the traditions of modern art itself. A new process of canon-formation is needed, one that includes much that has been excluded for reasons that relate to European colonial modernity. It is by embedding the decolonial narrative into the core of museums and memorial commissioning, that such a shift can gain long-term legitimacy. The anti-fascist art that we need at present is necessarily decolonial, just as the end of what Gloria Wekker has so precisely described as ‘white innocence’ needs to be pronounced, situated and critically elaborated on.<sup>48</sup>

Considering monuments (and the culture of monuments) as a central ground where the logic of coloniality has long been present could prove one of the most productive avenues for introducing decolonial critique into public discourse. The universalising assumptions of the ‘white European male’ (of a certain class) celebrated in colonial monuments are being challenged, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that the sometimes-violent reactions connected with these assumptions are symptomatic of the waning of power rather than supreme confidence in guaranteeing the perpetuation of white hegemony. Decolonial practices can form a basis for a new understanding of how Europe might come to terms with its past in a world that is pluricultural and multipolar. Averting the suppression of the ‘Never again!’ imperative that is concomitant with the expansion of neo-fascism and the increasing normalisation of Far-Right discourse by establishing continuity between colonial histories and the European fascisms of the twentieth century, with the atrocity of the Holocaust and the indelible mark of racial violence at its core, is the task that we want to put before all committed anti-fascist artists and cultural producers, including ourselves. As demonstrated by our analysis, a public culture of remembrance addressing colonial crimes and embracing anti-colonial monuments lacks consistency and support from governments in Western Europe. The few examples discussed above illustrate the scarcity and incompleteness of artistic responses realised as public art to address European racism and white supremacy. If they also offer some hope, this is in making apparent the task that we need to assume sooner rather than later.

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<sup>48</sup> See Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Durham, Duke University Press Books, 2016.