

# RAVAGED

## ART AND CULTURE IN TIMES OF CONFLICT

*edited by*

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M – Museum Leuven

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7	Foreword
11	A Public Statement – Jo Tollebeek

## **AN ALLEGORY**

29	'Mars and Minerva Have Never Been the Best of Friends' – Koenraad Brosens
37	New Mythologies on the Eve of the Revolution – Goedele Pulinx

## **ECHOES OF DEVASTATED CITIES**

51	The Smoke of Troy – Maarten de Pourcq
60	The Library of Alexandria – Monica Berti
66	Rome 1527 – Wim Blockmans
73	Beirut: 'If Time is my Problem' – Ghalya Saadawi

## **THE SHOCK OF THE GREAT WAR**

81	The Burning of Leuven – Mark Derez
86	Reims: The Bombarded Cathedral – Mark Derez
92	'Kultur' / 'Zivilisation' – Christina Kott
100	Literary Voices on War and Culture – Anke Gilleir

## **THE VISIBLE SIGN: THE RUIN**

109	War Tourism With and Without Rubble – Dominiek Dendooven
117	The Sublime Ruin of the City – Steven Jacobs
123	Dresden's Contradictory Modernities – Mark Jarzombek
134	Imaging Hiroshima – Yukie Kamiya

## **ICONOCLASTIC TRADITIONS**

143	A Desire for Purity? – Eline van Assche
153	The Revolt of Futurism – Johan de Smet
159	Book-Burning – Tom Verschaffel
166	Goodbye Hero! – Marjan Sterckx

# Goodbye Hero!

Marjan Sterckx

'Goodbye Lenin!' ran the headline in *De Standaard* newspaper in 2012 above a photo of the toppled statue of the Soviet leader. The inspiration for the headline came from the German film of the same name, released in 2003. The photo showed the deliberate de(con)struction – with a little help from a crane and some stout strapping – of the last statue of Lenin in the Mongolian capital Ulan Bator. Joseph Stalin had already been taken off the streets twenty years earlier.

The events in Mongolia were not unique. In Central and Eastern Europe any number of monuments from the Communist era have been destroyed, especially since the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. More recently in the Middle East, idealising statues of dictatorial leaders such as Saddam Hussein (Iraq, 2007), Muammar Gaddafi (Libya, 2011) and Hafez al-Assad (Syria, 2013) have been pulled down and smashed to pieces – all manifestations of the Arab Spring. The fall of regimes means the often literal fall of its associated 'heroes' and their statues. Since they are the expression and symbol of the victory and the narcissism of (those in) power the statues are deliberately destroyed and energetically expelled from the public forum, where they had blighted the eyes of the (oppressed) population. Up to a certain point, the man in power and his sculptural double are identified with each other.

## With ropes and ladders

It is a phenomenon that recurs in every era, this oscillation between the adoration and the destruction of the image. The internet is full of photos, cartoons and other images of predominantly traditional statues of leaders all over the world being tipped off their pedestals, tugged off by a crane or dragged down by the crowd. Their fall is often accompanied by taunts and jeers. Such practices and the artistic and documentary images of them go back a long way. Key episodes are the Byzantine Empire's religiously motivated iconoclasm in the eighth and ninth centuries and Europe's sixteenth-century Iconoclastic Fury. At the time of the French Revolution (when the term 'vandalism' was first used) many a statue of the French kings of the *ancien régime* was pulled from its pedestal. In Britain, statues of George III were treated with a similar contempt. On the Place Vendôme in Paris a statue of Louis XIV made way for a monumental column with a statue of Napoleon I on top, cast in the bronze from enemy cannon. In 1814 this monument too was destroyed – for the first time – by the supporters of the Bourbon Restoration. In the reign of Louis-Philippe and again thirty years later, a new statue of Napoleon appeared on the column (in 1833 and 1863), but that too was dragged down in its turn during the Commune of 1871.

The prints, paintings and photos that show statues and monuments being pulled down invariably feature ropes, initially often with ladders and hammers, later with cranes and cables. This particular iconographic tradition with its specific motifs and compositional formulas was and still is adopted in diverse media, consciously or otherwise. In her film *What We Saw Upon Awakening* (2006) the Afghan artist Lida Abdul shows a dozen or so black-clad men pulling on white ropes fixed to the shell of a monumental bombed-out building in Kabul. There is a performative quality to the act, this bringing down of the ruin of the monument. Her film *Clapping with Stones*



FIG.64 The statue of Lenin was removed from the Mongolian capital, Ulan Bator, in October 2012 in what has become a set ritual in revolts against rulers.



FIG.65 Five years prior to Lenin's removal from Ulan Bator, a statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled in Baghdad, amid huge public interest.



FIG.66 Charles Verlat, *The Duke of Alva's Statue Dragged through the Streets of Antwerp (1533)*, 1888 (Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen)

(2005) deals with the destruction of the monumental stone statues of the Buddha in Bamiyan, although here the statues were blown up rather than pulled down.

Sergei Eisenstein, the father of Russian montage cinema, had already used the same imagery in *October* (1928) when showing the dismantling, on Lenin's orders, of the statue of Tsar Alexander III in Moscow. In reconstructing the destruction he could reference a series of photographs by an anonymous photographer who had documented the process. Eisenstein, who often included statues in the picture as a cinematic symbol of the power of the establishment, adopted quite literally the very conspicuous use of ropes tied around head, torso and legs, and the associated ladders. But whereas the photos show the unexpectedly great care, rationality, deliberation and even caution with which the monument was dismantled, Eisenstein shows the heat of battle. In his montage-assisted mythologising interpretation of events he follows the iconoclastic iconographic tradition. While in reality the monument was completely surrounded by scaffolding and the pieces were guided down a ramp, Eisenstein's version of what happened is much more dramatic. In *October* the scene takes place at night and a jeering, jostling crowd vigorously deploys ropes and ladders to bring down the statue with all speed, with implicit references to an execution.

The original anonymous set of photos of the dismantling also includes pictures of the monument's colossal 'decapitated' head, lying on the ground to be gazed



FIG. 67 Johannes Oertel, *Pulling Down the Statue of King George III in 1859*, nineteenth century (New York, New-York Historical Society)

at by playing children. For contemporaries in Russia such an image undoubtedly evoked associations with the guillotine and the French Revolution, which was seen as the precursor of the October Revolution that overthrew the tsarist regime in 1917. The last photographs in the series show the now vacant pedestal from a low angle, its emptiness reinforced by the clear sky above it.

### Decapitated, vandalised, humanised, ignored

The physical and / or symbolic beheading of the ruler and his statues leaves the country 'headless'. The overthrow of the regime is followed by a temporary power vacuum: the seat of power is unoccupied but already coveted. After the overthrow of the statue the pedestal is left empty. Sometimes rebellious citizens clamber onto it and so take temporary possession of the plinth – and the power – or they plant Liberty Trees to replace the statues. In London the issue of the empty plinth is the ongoing theme of *The Fourth Plinth Project* (1999–2001) and *The Fourth Plinth Commission*



FIG. 68 A 2006 film by the Afghan artist Lida Abdul, *What We Saw Upon Awakening*, illustrates how old pictorial traditions can live on.

(2005–the present). The immediate cause was the north-eastern plinth in Trafalgar Square, erected in 1841 to support an equestrian statue of William IV but never occupied, in this case simply because the funds were lacking. Various contemporary artists, including Rachel Whiteread, Antony Gormley and Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, were specially commissioned to produce temporary installations to thematise and problematise the role of the pedestal as an instrument of power and a podium for heroes.

Sometimes the statue is not removed, but merely vandalised. Quite recently in Belgium several statues of King Leopold II were attacked due to the atrocities committed in what was then the Congo Free State, his own privately controlled territory, which later became a Belgian colony. In Ostend in 2004, for example, the action group *De stoeten Ostendenoare* hacked off the hand of a bronze African on Alfred Courtens's monument to Leopold II (1931), a protest action against the amputation of hands as a frequently-used form of punishment during Leopold's rule. In 2007 in Ekeren the statue of the king was daubed with red paint and a year later the same thing happened to Thomas Vinçotte's equestrian statue (1926) in Brussels. In Stanleyville / Kisangani the statue of the king was briskly removed in 1961, after independence, to make way for a monument to Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo, who was himself murdered that same year. His statue was also short-lived and was destroyed, as was that of Henry Morton Stanley.

The statue may also be figuratively dismantled by the artist himself, as in the oeuvre of Auguste Rodin. Through his 'humanisation', fragmentation and decentralisation of the monument his statues occupy an interesting intermediate position between adoration and destruction. His *Burghers of Calais* (1884–95) is the first example of the hero being literally brought down from his pedestal without his



CAT.47 Marcel Augis, *Ruins of City Centres*, 1914 (Brussels, Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire)







Leuvenstraat 1914

Ferdinand Giele



FIG.69 An anonymous photographer captured the dismantling of the statue of Tsar Alexander III in Moscow in 1918. Alexander Rodschenko used the photograph in 1927 for the cover of the avant-garde magazine *Novyi Lef* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art).

monument being harmed. Rodin adheres to the tradition of the monument but 'humanises' the hero by eliminating the plinth. Rodin used this device to put a number of heroic fourteenth-century citizens of Calais on the same footing, both figuratively and literally, as their fellow citizens and the viewer, and at the same time to inspire heroic deeds. Granted, Rodin's intention was not immediately carried out: his *Burghers* were initially installed on a high pedestal with fencing around it. In his statues of Victor Hugo (1889–97) and Honoré de Balzac (1891–98) Rodin abandoned the idealised representation of the model without depriving the authors of their monumentality, aura and heroic status. Nevertheless, the critics were not enamoured of these statues.

Even if he remains on his plinth and in one piece, the carved hero can still fall off his perch. In this case time is the principal factor. As already pointed out by Robert Musil in his *Nachlass zu Lebzeiten* (1936), nothing is as invisible as monuments we do not notice, even though they were meant to last forever. Indeed, many traditional monuments to our deceased lords and masters (including politicians, public figures, scholars, artists and writers) are rarely spared a glance. They have become part of the street furniture, used mainly by pigeons, or they have to make way for more useful street furniture or infrastructure. The rhetoric of many monuments is now hollow, their idiom is outdated and the individuals portrayed are no longer recognised or 'supported' by the new generation. Their visibility may be temporarily restored if there is a ceremony, conservation project or artistic intervention. In Antwerp in early April 2009, for instance, as part of his *Kalender 09*, Benjamin Verdonck put the equestrian statue of Leopold I temporarily back in the public eye by encasing the monarch's head in a pink ball. At the same time, to restore the monument's original commemorative function, he made a temporary memorial to the police horses deployed near the Bank of England during the G20 summit the day before.

The present fundamental 'invisibility' of many 'heroes' represented in traditional statue form means that they are no longer perceived and considered as such. So perhaps they lose their heroic status even more utterly than the rulers whose spectacular exit is helped along by the public and media destruction of their statues.



FIG. 70 Sven Augustijnen, Still from *Spectres*, 2011: the demolished statue of Henry Morton Stanley

Lut Pil, *Beginnen met Rodin* (Antwerp 1989); Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (London 2001); Mike O'Mahony, 'Bringing Down the Tsar: "Deconstructing" the Monument to Tsar Aleksandr III in Sergei Eisenstein's October', in: *Sculpture Journal*, 15 (2006), 272–77; Dario Gamboni, *Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London 2007).



CAT. 50 Jean Michel Ruyten, *The Iconoclasts*, nineteenth century (Bruges, Musea Brugge, Groeningemuseum)

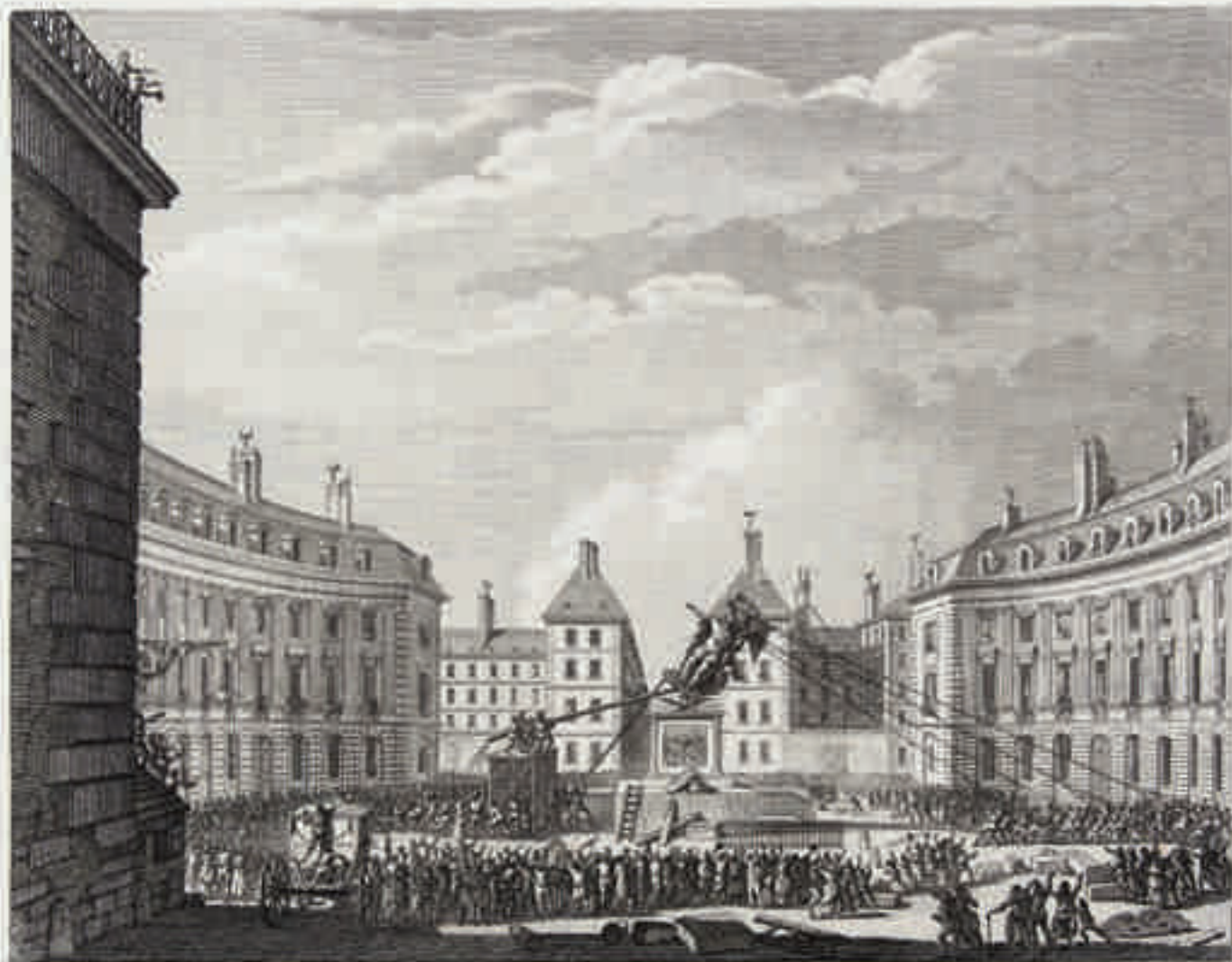


CAT. 58 Jules Girardet, *The Colonne Vendôme after its Demolition in May 1871*, 1871–90 (Paris, Musée Carnavalet)



Die Zerstörung der Königlichlichen Bild  
Säule zu New York.

La Destruction de la Statue royale  
à Nouvelle York.



STATUE DE LOUIS XIV ABATUE, PLACE DES VICTOIRES  
le 12 et le 13 Août 1792

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M's late Chief Curator, Veronique Vandekerchove (1965–2012), originally devised *Ravaged. Art and Culture in Times of Conflict*. The museum fondly dedicates the exhibition and this book to her.

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