

TODAS AS ARTES

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THIS IS WHERE I DRAW THE LINE: CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS ON PUBLIC MONUMENTS IN THE EAST OF EUROPE AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

É AQUI QUE EU DESENHO A LINHA: INTERVENÇÕES CRIATIVAS EM MONUMENTOS PÚBLICOS NO LESTE DA EUROPA E NO SUL GLOBAL

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AQUÍ ES DONDE TRAZO LA LÍNEA: INTERVENCIONES CREATIVAS EN MONUMENTOS PÚBLICOS DEL ESTE DE EUROPA Y EL SUR GLOBAL

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ABSTRACT: In recent times, there has been a rise in debates surrounding public monuments, with narratives becoming increasingly contested. While the act of *damnatio memoriae* is not new, this study will focus on how contemporary art is introducing a more imaginative form of protest when it comes to statues. It is interesting to note that despite the differences in geography, political destiny, and cultural aspects, countries in the former Eastern Bloc and the Global South share similar attitudes towards unwanted art in public spaces. This article will compare relevant examples from both regions and explore questions regarding the legality of such practices, as well as why contemporary public art often falls short. Ultimately, the goal is to try to identify what lies ahead for both existing and forthcoming public art.

Keywords: public art, protest, post-communism, post-colonialism.

RESUMO: Nos últimos tempos, tem havido um crescimento dos debates em torno dos monumentos públicos, com as narrativas a tornarem-se cada vez mais contestadas. Embora a ação de *damnatio memoriae* não seja nova, este estudo centrar-se-á na forma como a arte contemporânea está a introduzir uma forma mais imaginativa de protesto no que diz respeito às estátuas. É interessante notar que, apesar das diferenças em termos de geografia, orientação política e aspetos culturais, os países do antigo Bloco de Leste e do Sul Global partilham atitudes semelhantes em relação à arte indesejada em espaços públicos. Este artigo irá comparar exemplos relevantes de ambas as regiões e explorar questões relacionadas com a legalidade de tais práticas, bem como as razões pelas quais a arte pública contemporânea fica frequentemente aquém das expectativas. Em última análise, o objetivo é tentar identificar o que está por vir, tanto para a arte pública existente como para a futura.

Palavras-chave: arte pública, protesto, pós-comunismo, pós-colonialismo.

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RÉSUMÉ: Ces derniers temps, les débats autour des monuments publics se sont multipliés, les récits étant de plus en plus contestés. Si l'acte de *damnatio memoriae* n'est pas nouveau, cette étude se concentrera sur la manière dont l'art contemporain introduit une forme plus imaginative de protestation lorsqu'il s'agit de statues. Il est intéressant de noter qu'en dépit des différences géographiques, politiques et culturelles, les pays de l'ancien bloc de l'Est et du 'Global South' partagent des attitudes similaires à l'égard de l'art indésirable dans les espaces publics. Cet article comparera des exemples pertinents des deux régions et explorera les questions relatives à la légalité de ces pratiques, ainsi que les raisons pour lesquelles l'art public contemporain ne répond souvent pas aux attentes. En fin de compte, l'objectif est d'essayer d'identifier ce qui attend l'art public existant et à venir.

Mots-clés: art public, protestation, post-communisme, post-colonialisme.

RESUMEN: En los últimos tiempos se ha observado un aumento de los debates en torno a los monumentos públicos, con narrativas cada vez más contestadas. Aunque el acto de *damnatio memoriae* no es nuevo, este estudio se centrará en cómo el arte contemporáneo está introduciendo una forma más imaginativa de protesta cuando se trata de estatuas. Es interesante observar que, a pesar de las diferencias geográficas, de destino político y de aspectos culturales, los países del antiguo Bloque del Este y del Sur Global comparten actitudes similares hacia el arte no deseado en los espacios públicos. Este artículo comparará ejemplos relevantes de ambas regiones y explorará cuestiones relativas a la legalidad de tales prácticas, así como las razones por las que el arte público contemporáneo a menudo se queda corto. En última instancia, el objetivo es tratar de identificar lo que está por venir tanto para el arte público existente como para el venidero.

Palabras-clave: arte público, protesta, poscomunismo, poscolonialismo.

1. Introduction

'So much is said against public monuments', wrote journalist George Alfred Townsend in 1891 (Savage, 2009: 195), and clearly not much has changed since. In fact, only in the last few years revolts and protests directed towards statues have increasingly made the news, especially since they have started to occur in regions not typically associated with the toppling of statues (Thompson, 2022: 22). In 2017 issues were raised concerning the perpetuation of racism through Confederate monuments in the U.S.A. especially in the light of their vocal white supremacist supporters (Forest & Johnson, 2019: 127) and they came to a peak soon after the death of George Floyd in 2020 (Dickenson, 2021: 16). #RhodesMustFall, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, accelerations in the decolonisation process fueled by the ongoing migrant crisis, and the war in Ukraine, all soon turned towards active processes of *damnatio memoriae* and expanded into very diverse geographical territories.

The most recent comparable wave of violence directed towards statues and symbols took place during the accelerated changes in regime, mostly in Eastern Europe (Merewether, 1999) and Latin America (Bădescu, 2019), which are, not coincidentally, the two locations which will be the focus of this study. The current actions, however, bring forth at least two important distinctions: unlike the relatively justified erasure of those fallen by the hands of those newly in power, which we have witnessed often enough throughout history (Thompson, 2022: 25), this time the assault comes 'from below'. It comes not from an exchange of authority but from the people who question said authority in a very public and visible manner. Actually, the visibility of their actions is key – the monuments are usually not being fully taken down (and even when they are, the process is well-documented and disseminated via social media), but rather the partially destroyed monuments are left as proof of protest against the establishment. A secondary distinction, this time coming from

the post-modernist characteristics of contemporary art, lies in the fact that political attitudes towards monuments take on more creative modes of expression than simply destruction. They are rich in symbolism perhaps equally so as the monuments themselves were once intended to be.

These two aspects underline the special conditions held by art in public spaces, the demands for which are very specific and not at all simple. Statues and monuments need to tread a fine line between being too 'artsy' or too political and not artistic enough (Evans, 2018: 16; Mothersill, 2013: 78). This negotiation is just one of the issues that complicate and make the problem of public monuments so interesting at the same time. Also, just because they were commissioned to be visible, it does not mean they are intended for the public's benefit (Hoffman, 1991: 542) and just because they were created by artists, it does not mean they got to follow an independent and individual artistic vision (Hoffman, 1991: 543). Rather, they are a form of state speech (Valls, 2019: 177) and as artworks, they are most times more than just aesthetic discourses, and even when they are more aesthetically inclined, they are hardly innocently so (Johnson, 2002: 293). To a certain extent, all art can be interpreted as a socio-political construct, yet this statement stands truer when it comes to public artworks due to their location alone (Levinson, 2018: 32). Thus, whatever attitudes people have towards them – be it pro or con – are never simply aesthetic considerations either (Levinson, 2018: 147), and obviously, the artistic interventions we will take on later are inevitably politically motivated.

2. Public spaces

Before getting into the actual core of the subject at hand, some methodological clarifications need to be made, both on the nature and function of monuments and on what constitutes public space, as well as how these all are interconnected. As Dickenson (2021: 5) states, 'true public space is hard to find' as there are clearly rules and regulations at play, always. However, for the purpose of this paper, we will consider 'public space' those locations that are open to the public without a fee and at all hours and are not in any way fenced off or delimited. This is as close to the narrative of the democratic public space as we are likely to get, yet it is painfully clear that even in these locations not everyone's voice has an equal statute (Bowman-McElhone, 2021: 1186).

The apparent democracy of public space creates a further deception according to which the monuments that embellish it are somehow the result of a consensus, yet that is clearly not the case (Bowman-McElhone, 2021: 1179; Dickenson, 2021: 6). Lack of consensus is not in itself problematic, as we know that unified political communities are largely imagined (Anderson, 2006: 16), but if we are to consider society as the place where we acquire most of our (collective) memory (Halbwachs in Deegan, 2018: 21) the need for representation in the public space becomes a critical issue.

When it comes to contested monuments, they say more about the times they were created in, than of those that are represented or glorified (Hood, 2021: 9; Dickenson, 2021: 17). Therefore, it's no surprise that their contestation reflects current sentiments. For a monument to be truly efficient there is an expectation of endurance, ideally even permanence (Dickenson, 2021: 13; Evans, 2016: 58; Merewether, 1999) and it is obvious that some do manage to become iconic (Johnson, 2002: 293; Hoffman, 1991: 544). Talks of removal and relocation inevitably alter the outcome of the monument and it is all rendered even more complicated by the fact that any such moves should ideally be in the hands of the

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community as a whole (Thompson, 2022: 13). We will not dwell here on the preferred or preferable methods of dealing with undesirable public art, such as relocation either to museums (Baxter, 2021) or to more permissible public spaces such as cemeteries (Forest & Johnson, 2019: 129; Hoffman, 1991: 133; Levinson, 2018: 147). Instead, we will focus on the more creative methods of dissent on the works that remain *in situ*, considering this apparent 'vandalism' inflicted on them as proof of the multifaceted and changing nature of memory (Deegan, 2018: 28; Merewether, 1999).

3. Creative practices of dissent between East and South

Aside from the fact that revolt against public monuments is established as a global phenomenon, this study will focus on two apparently very different territories, which nevertheless have much more in common than it might seem at first glance. The former Eastern Bloc and the Global South, even though separated by geography, cultural aspects, and each with complicated political destinies, these two areas share a great deal of perhaps unexpected similarities and entanglements (Bădescu, 2019). The following comparisons will take into consideration various aspects and motivations when it comes to dealing with undesirable artworks in the public space. Thus, the three pairs will all contain an example from the South American continent as well as one from East Europe which will be presented side by side.

3.1. Sofia and La Paz

The first case study will deal with two works representing glorified figures of the past, which are now under intense scrutiny for representing destructive regimes and as such they both received satirical and critical feminist makeovers. The Soviet Army memorial in Sofia, Bulgaria is a frequent target of creative 'vandalism' and the reasons for it are not exactly mysterious. It is a colossus of *social realism* depicting the heroic liberating Soviet Army of World War II. It sits in a prominent and easily accessible location in the vicinity of Sofia's University St. Kliment Ohridski, it is also seen as a constant Russian presence in the Bulgarian capital, and because of this, it is directly used to criticize the Moscow government from afar.

In this particular instance, the artistic protest of 2012 was in direct connection with the arrest of the female Russian punk group Pussy Riot, much to the outrage of the global art world, following their public performance of a 'punk prayer' against Vladimir Putin in a Moscow cathedral. The women were charged with hooliganism and incitement to religious hatred, both rather transparent cover-ups for what was censorship. The intervention on the Sofia monument left little to the imagination: 'Pussy Riot are an inspirational symbol of the fight for democracy in Russia' (N/A, 2012) the signs read, and the soldiers' figures were donning colourful balaclavas just like the ones worn by the members of Pussy Riot which established an irrevocable visual connection between the two events.

On the other side of the world, in an affluent neighbourhood of La Paz, Bolivia the statue of Isabelle the 1st of Castille, la Católica, seen as a financial agent for the enslavement of the American natives under Christopher Columbus was temporarily dressed in the traditional clothes of a 'chola'. The statue atop its pedestal was completely dressed up in folkloric garments including a colourful fringe skirt, or 'pollere', an 'aguayo' which is a scarf, or rather a carrying cloth worn by the women of the Andes region and a typical hat (Menéndez, 2020). The activist group chose the day of the protest to coincide with the anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas as a recognition of the fact that the colonization was equal to a

genocide. For the duration of the event, the square was temporarily renamed *Plaza de la Chola Globalizada* (Square of the Globalized Chola).

Neither action involved violence, but rather embodied a spirit of creative, D.I.Y. activism and it is no coincidence that in both cases the protesters made use of textiles. The fabrics clearly exemplify the anonymous, artisanal production of women in communities worldwide whose craftsmanship often goes unsung. This correlation is not to the members of Pussy Riot either, as they take a 'manly' accessory like the balaclava and transform it into a colourful piece of knitwear, thus signalling a feminist type of guerilla fighter.

3.2. São Paulo and Sibiu

A second, quite different type of protest, is the more impulsive and rather basic one of pouring paint over statues. Often, but not always, this is red in order to symbolize the blood spilt in various injustices. Proposed in 1920 and finally erected in 1953, the Art Deco work of the renowned sculptor Victor Brecheret, *Monument to the Bandeiras* in São Paulo, Brazil was beloved for a long time (Latuf Sanchez, 2020). Built for the city's 400th anniversary, at 50m long, the work is quite a site to behold, so its appeal is understandable, yet as the figure of the pioneering and unifying bandeirante was replaced with that of the pillager it was spray painted several times, in 2012, 2013, 2016 despite its impressive size.

In 2021, in Sibiu, Romania belated tribute to the 18th century Baron Samuel von Brukenthal was inaugurated in the city he helped shape (Fati, 2021). The 3m statue, of no artistic distinction, though celebrated by some, has also opened up a nationalistic debate over his presumed role in the violent reprisal of a Romanian revolt in 1784. He is seen as an instrument of the Habsburg regime and the fact that he also has a statue in the former imperial capital of Vienna is not exactly helping his cause. Of course, the discussion is more nuanced, yet it did not stop a person from spilling a bucket of red, yellow, and blue paint – the colours of the Romanian flag – across the statue's front just a month after its inauguration. The branded shopping bag of a chain of German supermarkets which contained the paint bucket was an added irony even though it was most likely unintentional. These examples go to show that older works can gain new haters in changing times, just as well as works can bring up very old issues. It should be noted, however, that contrary to all the rest of the provided examples, the event in Sibiu is largely condemned by the intellectual elite as not only nationalistic but even racist towards what are now local minorities (Fati, 2021).

3.3. Mexico City and Bucharest

The last pair of works is perhaps the strangest. So far, we have seen actions taken against the monuments of past perpetrators or symbols associated with oppression and these were reasonably justified by seeking representation, reparations or even revenge to an extent. What is perhaps less understandable is when a contemporary work of art meant to celebrate or commemorate a worthy cause faces hostility. Until now, the general sentiment behind the protests is that the affected monuments should not have been built or celebrated in the first place, yet sometimes even though people agree on the need for a monument they can still strongly disagree with it once it's built. Could this judgment be based more on aesthetic reasons than political ones? It remains to be seen.

One such instance is the *Monument to Absence* in Mexico City, Mexico inaugurated on 1 October 2018, for the 50th anniversary of the Tlatelolco Massacre. At that time a still

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uncertain number of students died in a bloody repression of protests in the wake of the '68 Summer Olympics which started only a few days later (The Contested Histories Initiative, 2022). The current minimalist monument created by Israeli artist Yael Bertone and consisting of footprints in concrete was created after consultation with survivors and victims' families, and yet it is still contested and perceived as insincere. Simultaneously, an unsanctioned anti-monument was unveiled in a public garden. This combines the form of a commemorative stele, topped with the silhouette of a dove similar to the one on the '68 Olympic logo, but crucially it outwardly accuses the government: '1968 2 de Octubre / No se olvida / Fue el ejército / Fue el estado (1968 2nd October / It is not forgotten / It was the army / It was the State)' (The Contested Histories Initiative, 2022: 11) (Figure 1). In this case, it is quite clear that the motivation for erecting a whole other monument is twofold: the delicate and inconspicuous footprints are not forceful or 'present' enough, but there is also a pretty good chance that no matter what the monument the state commissioned it still would not have managed to completely please the public without an outright admission of guilt.



Figure 1: Counter-monument to the Tlatelolco Massacre, Mexico City, 2018

Source: The author

In a similar vein, the *Monument for Anti-Communist Fight in Bucharest*, in Romania, occupies a symbolic position in what is now called the Square of the Free Press on the spot formerly occupied by an immense statue of Lenin. Conceived by the sculptor Mihai Buculei and unveiled in December 2015, the so-called 'Wings' monument was commissioned by the Association of the Former Political Detainees of Romania, approximately 10 years before. Standing over 20m tall, the work is harsh, angular, metallic, and unquestionably monumental, yet it is also unremarkable, and it says next to nothing about communism or actual resistance, other than a very bland message of hope. Two years later the monument was spray-painted with the mysterious and rather poetic words: '*e strigător la cer... privește* (for crying out loud... look)' (Muraru, 2018) written in rounded, child-like cursive (Figure 2). In Romanian, the idiom is a play on words advising one to look towards the skies and shout in revolt. While we can not be sure of the intention of the writer it is possible that the text belongs to an anonymous artist going under the pseudonym Grig who encourages the audience to look at the sky to be reminded of everyday beauty (Nicolae, 2013). Or it could just be a not-so-subtle reminder of the corruption in the Romanian political system which does very little to actually honour the memory of the anti-communist fighters and victims of the former regime.

4. Contradictions in conflicts

All of these examples have been swiftly cleaned up by the authorities, sometimes at great, financial cost (N/A 2012; N/A 2016; N/A 2021c) and they were publically criticized by even high-ranking members of the establishment



Figure 2: Intervention on *Monument for Anti-Communist Fight*, Bucharest, 2015

Source: The author

(Donn, 2021a; Muraru, 2018) while the Russian embassy expressed concern over the frequent acts of ‘vandalism’ and demanded more surveillance of the monument which is also a common theme throughout the responses (N/A, 2012; N/A, 2021). This means the interventions were ephemeral and remain largely documented only through the means of social media, but this does not make them any less important. As a matter of fact, they too fall within the expectations we have of public art: they educate whilst being conveniently artistic. It should be clear that, as expressions of the dominant culture, the vernacular use of the monuments can differ greatly from the patriotic commemorations intended by the system (Browne, 1995: 245), and yet in the fervour against public monuments, things can get a little confusing.

We have shown above that even Columbus-related statues are being questioned and destroyed, so there’s no wonder he’s not being spared the same treatment. Defacement, decapitation, and toppling are all strategies that have been used against his statues, but even though by some he is considered a ruthless, murdering colonizer, there is a story of an often-overlooked minority group which had adopted him as a heroic symbol. The Italian Americans of the East Coast of the United States were drawn to the powerful Italian-born symbol as a way to establish their valuable heritage in a country that largely disrespected their community (Roos, 2023). Building monuments associated with figures they identified with was a legitimizing strategy meant to increase the visibility of European immigrants as they became new Americans (Bogart in Levinson, 2018: 78). Thus, the current protests and

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controversies that plead for the abolition of Columbus Day are unintentionally hurting a migrant community who objectively had nothing to do with genocide and forces them to give up a symbol around which they forged on identity.

There are also severed examples of statues that were caught in the crossfire, such as the statue of Padre António Vieira in Lisbon, Portugal. The very 1st statue erected in honour of a famed 17th-century Jesuit priest, was seen to represent a historic debt to his commemoration, similar to that of Samuel von Brukenthal, mentioned above. He was a known fighter against the abuses of the Inquisition and a staunch defender of the rights of the indigenous people of Brazil, even denouncing the brutality of their treatment to the Portuguese courts (N/A, 2020), and yet, his monument was still altered. In an uninspired stylistic choice, the statue of the cleric is surrounded by three figures of nearly naked indigenous children, pushing the line of the white saviour, which seems in poor taste and ignited conflict especially perhaps among those who are not familiar with his story and take the statue as face value: a Catholic priest, cross held high, surrounded by small boys.

At other times, the sheer association with a culture can bring contempt upon an otherwise inoffensive statue. Such is the case of the Miguel de Cervantes statue in Los Angeles, California which was attacked in August of 2020. We are taking this example into consideration since it deals with problems of the Spanish-speaking culture even though it is located in the U.S.A. which brings an entirely different set of meanings. In the light of the Black Lives Matter uprisings, defacing the Cervantes statue was interpreted as a revolt against all things Spanish and colonialist. This is anger rather misdirected towards an otherwise pretty innocent Cervantes. But there is another possible and opposite reading, one that considers the gesture as proof of anti-Hispanic racism in the United States (Arango Correa, 2020). It is entirely possible that faced with the expulsion of Confederate statues, supporters of General Robert E. Lee took up arms against the '*bad hombres*' of Spanish heritage depicted in the public space.

One last example of 'misdirected' actions towards a monument took place in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, when in 2017, amidst a nationwide wave of protests, political stencils appeared on one of the city's monuments. As the people took to the streets and made accusations of corruption and demands of resignation a series of stencils signed 'Banksy' portrayed some of the day's most despised contemporary politicians grinning widely behind prison bars (Man & Beligăr, 2017) (Figures 3 and 4). The message is straightforward and them being painted on the *Monument to Heroes of the Nation* only heightens the irony. This monument, inspired by a chapel and topped with a huge cross, doesn't have a big fan base, but it's not particularly despised in any way. Thus, it is safe to assume that aside from the associations between heroes and criminals of the nation, the spot was chosen because of the accessible and unguarded location since especially during the night the place is frequented by young people engaging in shenanigans. In this case, it is quite plain to see that the monument itself was not the focus of the protest, instead it was a suitable platform which also ensured the intervention would be amply publicized later. The artist or artists thus counted on gaining exposure by being called 'vandalism' and advertised as such. The 'Banksy' signature or preface was also a particularly witty addition since it too contributed to plenty of discussion around the meaning behind the artist's initiative.



Figures 3 and 4: Intervention on *Monument to Heroes of the Nation* (details), Cluj-Napoca, 2017
Source: The author

5. Inferences

As Deutsche says: 'conflict, division, and instability, then do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are the conditions of its existence. The threat arises with efforts to supersede conflict, for the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its exclusions are taken into account and open to contestation.' (Deutsche, 1998: 289). In this sense, calling these interventions 'vandalism' may not feel the most accurate since for some (or is it for most?) they are legitimate expressions of protest (Levinson, 2018: 12). As usual with art in public spaces, emotions tend to run high and this was also the case during the Q&A after delivering the presentation for the *Todas as artes, todos os nomes* Conference.

The presentation used Lisbon's *Monument to the Discoveries*, a famous work on the bank of the river Tagus, as an example. Erected in 1960, during the Salazar dictatorship in 2021, it was defaced with a 20m-long slogan: 'Blindly sailing for money, humanity is drowning in a scarlett sea lia (sic)' (Donn, 2021b) (Figure 5). The French art student later identified (Donn, 2021c) was thus alluding to Portuguese colonialist crimes and enslavement of natives during the otherwise largely celebrated Age of Discoveries. The monument's curators were aware of the contestations well before the graffiti appeared and choosing to add – in the form of context and information – rather than remove (Forest & Johnson, 2019: 130), they created an exhibition inside the monument that tackles the issues of "dissonant heritage" in an academic and critical manner (N/A, 2021c).

Despite using air quotes during the presentation and implying the stance of a legitimate protest, a member of the audience nonetheless found it challenging and disrespectful to hear the term 'vandalism' used, particularly considering the numerous individuals impacted. I want to emphasize that the usage of the term 'vandalism' highlights the perspective of the establishment regarding these acts (Donn, 2021c), as well as their legal stance. If these interventions were not illegal, and let's say they were commissioned like some murals, the

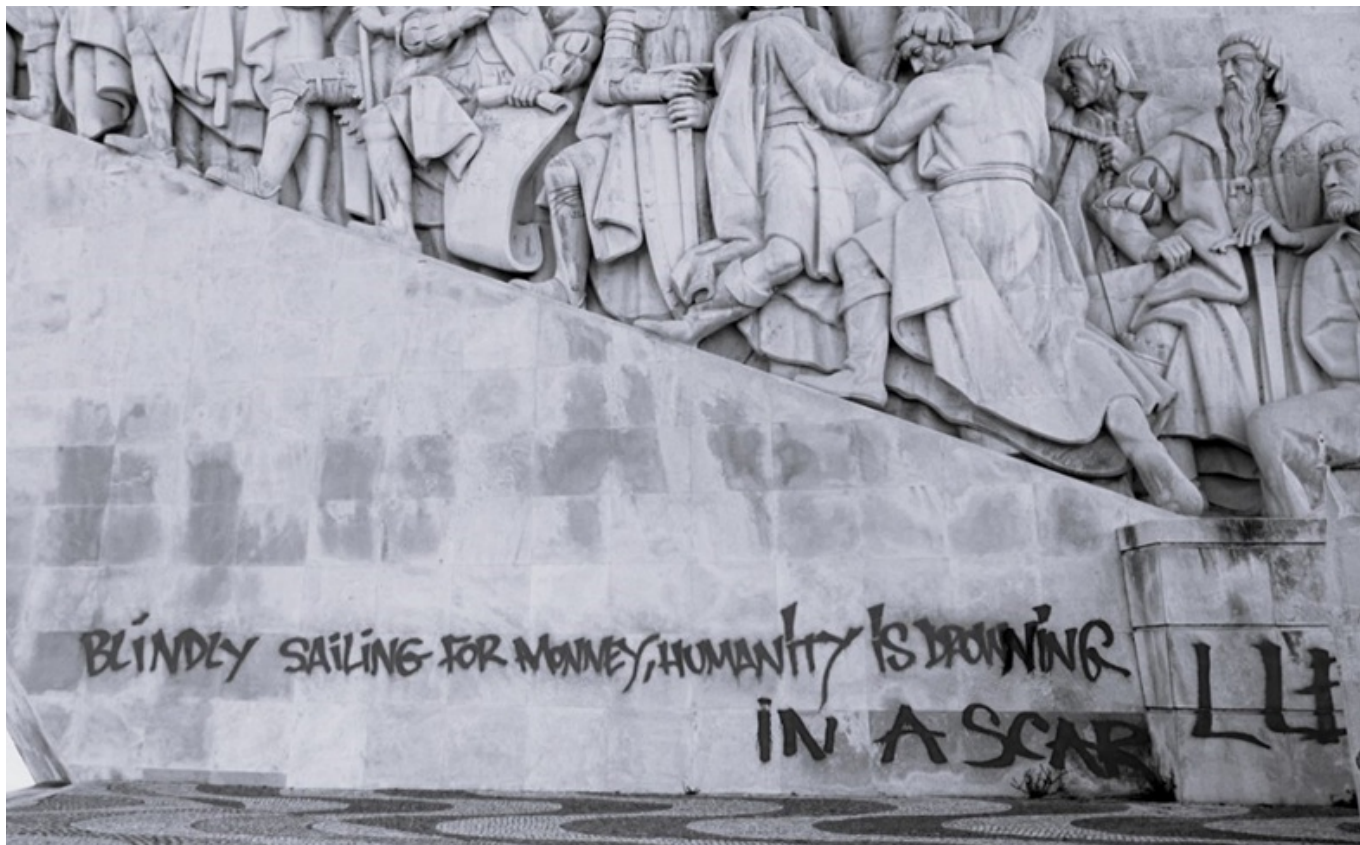


Figure 4: Intervention on *Monument to the Discoveries* (detail), Lisbon, 2021

Source: The author

situation would have been completely different. Also, in regards to the comment which mentioned that the word ‘vandalism’ implies placing a moral filter on these types of actions, positioning them in a negative light – this is not the time nor the place to discuss the moral aspects of lawlessness, yet, it raises a bigger concern is raised: what if the artist had written ‘Make Portugal great again!’ instead of what was written on the monument? From a legal standpoint, the message would not have mattered, and it would have likely been washed off just as quickly. Yet, the audience member would have probably been more inclined to call it an act of vandalism or an insult.

Although terminology is clearly important as it reflects how elements are perceived, I would much rather further explore why contemporary art often fails when placed in public space (Hoffman, 1991: 548; Evans, 2018: 196) and if perhaps we are moving past the age of building public monuments (Aarons, 2022: 62). This is problematic in the sense that by not removing currently existing monuments and not course-correcting by adding new ones, the cities will be left with monuments that will be ever less relevant and harder to relate to, especially for the younger generations. Between negligible old monuments and forsaken new ones, we may be witnessing the decline of a once-powerful form of expression, both politically and aesthetically (Guerra, 2023).

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