



OBJECT OF DOUBT

Kirsty White

A woman poses in front of a free-standing metal sculpture. Composed of seven multi-coloured panels that intersect to form a continuous plane, it blocks most of the surrounding landscape from view. She's tall and smiling and wearing an orange dress. She could be a stripe in the sculpture herself.

This is an advert for Bauhaus-trained designer Herbert Bayer's *Kaleidoscreen*, an experimental project he worked on for ALCOA (Aluminium Corporation of America) in 1957. Designed as an outdoor space divider, and installed within the Aspen Institute campus in Aspen, Colorado, the intention for the *Kaleidoscreen* was that it would democratise art. An industrially fabricated, and hence affordable, artwork that would 'grace patio[s], pool[s], garden[s] and store[s]'¹ across America and the world.

Bayer was one of the most famous graduates of the Bauhaus. Born in Austria in 1900, he emigrated to America in 1938, where his multi-faceted career as an artist, photographer, art director, environmental and interior designer, and architect flourished. His legacy however, has become controversial for the work he did for the National Socialist Party (the Nazi party) in Germany in the 1930s. Whilst in Berlin, he worked on high-profile government projects, including the propaganda exhibitions *German People*, *German Work* (1934) and *Germany* (1936), as well as promotional materials like the Hitler Youth brochure *German youth in a changing world* (1936). And while he claimed he never cooperated with the National Socialists, or that any of the work he did was political, the question lingers: do these commissions—for one of the most undemocratic regimes in history—undermine his later democratically minded projects?

Bayer's advert is included in this exhibition as the basis of Céline Condorelli's *After Bayer* (2019), which also comprises a text written by Condorelli herself. The work highlights the complexity of our relationship with the past, and the artist's own mixed feelings about Bayer. She writes in the work: 'I struggle in my relationship to the material [Bayer] produced when faced with his early career, understanding how implicated and ambiguous his position was in relationship to the politics and context of his time.' For Condorelli, learning of Bayer's connection

to National Socialism made her look at him in a new light. She has continued to reference his work in her own practice, but for different reasons than she did originally: she is interested in the ethical questions it poses, and how it can be productive in helping us think through these dilemmas.

Objects with problematic legacies have made headlines in recent years as governments around the world take steps to redress now contested histories. In the U.S. municipalities including Austin, Baltimore, Dallas and Brooklyn have removed Confederate symbols from public grounds, believing that they glorify white supremacy and memorialise a government whose founding principle was the perpetuation and expansion of slavery. Those who object to the removals claim that the memorials are part of American cultural heritage.² In Ukraine, all 1,320 statues of the communist revolutionary Lenin have been removed following a government drive to rid the country of Soviet-era symbols. The initiative, nicknamed *Leninopad*, or 'Leninfall,' also orders the renaming of streets and cities, and was made law by President Petro Poroshenko in May 2015.³ In the UK, students at Oxford University campaigned to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes outside Oriel College in 2015, arguing that the British imperialist's legacy should not be celebrated. In January 2016, the college announced it would not be removing the statue, saying a consultation process had shown 'overwhelming' support for keeping it.⁴

A film that captures the complexity of dealing with such historically loaded material is Laura Mulvey and Mark Lewis' *Disgraced Monuments* (1993). Examining the destruction of Soviet monuments at the end of the Cold War, the film remains topical, detailing various ways commemorative objects can be handled when the ideological regime they represent is repealed. One example that might prove useful as a model for others is Budapest's Memento Park — an open-air museum dedicated to dismantled statues and plaques from Hungary's Communist period (1949-1989). Founded in 1993, four years after the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, the park was designed by Hungarian architect Ákos Eleőd. Eleőd saw the park as not only about dictatorship, but also about democracy. 'After all,' he said 'only democracy is able to give the opportunity to let us think freely about dictatorship.'⁵

1 Advertisement for Aluminium *Kaleidoscreen* designed for the Alcoa collection by Herbert Bayer

2 These debates came to a head in Charlottesville, Virginia on 12 August 2017, when a car was deliberately driven into a group of people peacefully protesting the 'Unite the Right' rally, killing one and injuring 28. Jason Kessler, the organizer of the rally, had been protesting the proposed removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee in Emancipation Park in Charlottesville for months.

3 Wilford, Greg. "Ukraine has removed all 1,320 statues of Lenin." *The Independent*. Last modified 20/08/17. Accessed 21/09/19. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/lenin-statues-removed-soviet-union-russia-crimea-ukraine-bolshevik-communist-petro-poroshenko-a7903611.html>.

4 Rawlinson, Kevin. "Cecil Rhodes statue to remain at Oxford after 'overwhelming support'." *The Guardian*. Last modified 29/01/16. Accessed 21/09/19. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jan/28/cecil-rhodes-statue-will-not-be-removed--oxford-university>

5 Memento Park Budapest, "The Designer's Commendation." Accessed 21/9/19. <http://www.mementopark.hu/pages/sights/>



Budapest's decision to preserve the statues rather than destroy them highlights the value memorials can have in teaching us about the past, even if that history is now widely disagreed with. Taken out of their original context in the city centre and re-framed as examples of a now defunct ideology, the statues lose their potency as political symbols, and instead take on a new role as historical artefacts. Whereas historically the motivation to erect commemorative objects was to 'break with the past' and instate new traditions or institutions – destroying ideologically obsolete artefacts in the process – an alternative could be to look at how, and in what context, preservation might be possible.⁶

The challenge with this, of course, is changing the narrative around the artworks or artefacts in question. For Jamie Fitzpatrick, this is about transforming the look and feel of the objects themselves. In his coloured-wax and foam sculptures he deliberately employs the same motifs as the memorials he examines, emphasising what absurd symbols of exaggerated masculinity and nationhood they are. Similarly, in his photographs of defaced London monuments *RGE LLIAM F H ND F CAMBIDG* (2016) and *SPCE COMPN CAENH 8 DU OF KG GCO P C* (2016) he seeks to challenge the authority that these objects hold, disfiguring them almost entirely with oil bar.

In a similar vein, Aleksandra Domanović's inkjet print, *Portrait (bump map)* (2011) subverts the machismo normally associated with such militaristic commemorations whilst also drawing attention to those who have traditionally been omitted from the historical record. The print depicts a digitally modelled 'female version' of the former president of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito. Domanović commissioned a Ukrainian 3D modeller to create the model from photographs of the ideological leader, asking him to emphasise the female characteristics of his face. The title, (*bump map*), refers to a technique in computer graphics used to simulate the illusion of depth on the surface of an object. Clearly visible in Domanović's print, it draws attention to the role technology plays in the changing face of history.

Domanović's use of computer modelling also brings to mind the recent attempts to digitally recreate the antiquities stolen or deliberately destroyed by ISIS in Iraq, Syria and Libya since 2014. An example of this is the 3D printed reconstruction of the Arch of Triumph – an 1800-year-old Roman arch from the Palmyra site in Syria, which was blown up by ISIS in 2015. The reconstruction was initiated by the Institute for Digital Archaeology, whose website states that: 'by using digital techniques to map and preserve monuments and other

Image above: Céline Condorelli, *After Bayer*, 2019. Digital print on paper, 34.3 x 26 cm. Alcoa Aluminum advertisement featuring 'Aluminum Kaleidoscreen designed for the Alice collection by Herbert Bayer' (1958), offset-printed magazine advertisement, 34.3 x 26 cm

6 This is still a divisive concept, and one that changes case to case. To return to the Confederate statues for example, many have been preserved, despite attempts to remove them. Municipalities such as Alabama (2017), Georgia (early 20th century), Mississippi (2004), North Carolina (2015), South Carolina (2000), Tennessee (2013, updated 2016), and Virginia (1902) have passed state laws to impede, or in the cases of Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina prohibit altogether, their removal or alteration. This is problematic because the narrative around the statues has not changed. They remain in prominent places on public grounds, with no acknowledgement that the figures they memorialise might not be the heroes they make out to be.

aspects of shared human history, we are able to ensure that nobody can deny history or dictate that their narrative or ideology stands above the shared story of all humanity'.⁷ But can technology ever truly preserve or reconstruct lost artefacts, and does the experience of viewing a replica live up to the original? Patrick Hough is critical of this idea, asserting that remakes of historic artefacts 'always return to us as a fiction or in the guise of a prop'. His sculpture *Funerary Relief* (2016) demonstrates this, mimicking both heritage reconstruction projects and props from film and TV. Based on an image of a stone relief from Palmyra which was published by ISIS online, the sculpture was remodelled digitally, CNC milled in polystyrene and then finished by an expert team of prop makers. The result looks very similar to the original relic, but lacks any historical or spiritual significance. It is an illustration of the past, not an embodiment of it.

This is significant as it calls into question the meaning of heritage itself. According to art historian Dario Gamboni, 'heritage results from a continuous process of interpretation and selection that attributes [...] certain objects (rather than... others) resources that postpone their degradation'.⁸ In other words, history is constructed, and the objects or buildings that are protected are a subjective choice made by a group of people on behalf of a city, a nation, or even themselves. In Emilio Moreno's film *Stone Acrobatics* (2015), the fate of a Romanesque chapel located in his hometown region in Spain, hinges on the whim of one government official. In a last-ditch attempt to reunite with his estranged daughter — who works for John D. Rockefeller Jr. — the official agrees to sell the chapel to the financier in 1956, despite the sale of national heritage being illegal in Spain. The chapel is dismantled stone by stone, shipped to New York, and rebuilt as an exhibit in Rockefeller, Jr.'s museum of medieval art.

Moreno's film describes not only the privatisation and commodification of his country's national heritage, but also the consequence this has on the retelling of history itself. This subject is furthered by Maryam Jafri, whose text and photographic installation *Getty vs. Ghana* (2012) compares two sets of photographs dating from Ghana's Independence Day in 1957, one copyrighted by Getty and the other belonging to the Ghana Ministry of Information. Side-by-side, subtle differences are highlighted between the two sets of photographs — incorrect dates, wrong captions and image manipulations. Whilst minor, the discrepancies show the ease with which history can be written and changed, highlighting, like Moreno does, the consequences of foreign ownership of a country's cultural property.

What emerges from these stories of removal and displacement is that manipulating cultural heritage manipulates history itself. The past is ephemeral; all that remains to document is the material trace or record, whether that be a statue, an artwork, a written account or a photograph. Tampering with these relics changes the story that is left to future generations. The challenge of the future therefore, is not only to safeguard those artefacts we already recognise as 'heritage,' but also to question our notion of this concept, to determine why some objects are privileged above others, and whose moral compass decides what is on public display? In an era when countries are increasingly looking inward to the construction of their own national identity, now is the time we look at who is being honoured and how, and if required, how we can change the look and shape of tomorrow's cultural heritage.

Kirsty White is a writer and curator. She is currently Programme Manager of Exhibitions and Events at Firstsite in Colchester. Between 2016-18 she founded and curated the contemporary art programme and commissioning platform *Being and Appearing* at the Swiss Church in London. She is the winner of the Burlington Contemporary Art Writing Prize 2019.

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Front cover image: Aleksandra Domanović, *Portrait (bump map)*, 2011. Inkjet print, red frame, 72x52 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

7 The Institute for Digital Archaeology. "The Triumphal Arch." Accessed 06/10/19. <http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/the-triumphal-arch>
8 Gamboni, Dario. "World Heritage. Shield or Target." *Conservation. The Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter*, XVI/2 (2001), pp.5-11; reprinted in *DOCUMENTA* (13), The Book of Books (Ostfildern, 2012), pp.293-5