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“Censorship now!!”: Destruction and Memory in Art

This essay was originally written in 2017 with German readers in mind, in response to the controversies around art, censorship, and destruction that convulsed the American art scene that year. While the art world has since moved on to new scandals, it has failed to develop theoretical tools for understanding these protests. The arguments presented here are thus no less relevant today than they were three years ago. The fallout from the 2017 Whitney Biennial – and the simplistic invocations of “justice” and “censorship” that characterized it – continue to delineate the discussion. I believed then, as I do now, that these debates will remain stymied until we recognize the true stakes of destruction – and the cruel contingency of freedom.

In 1955 in Mississippi, a 14-year-old boy named Emmett Till, a Chicagoan visiting relatives, was mutilated and murdered by two white men. Roy Bryant and his half-brother J. W. Milam believed that Till, who was Black, had propositioned Bryant’s wife Carolyn. In fact, Carolyn Bryant lied when she accused Till of harassing and threatening her. The fact that she only confessed to this lie in 2008, in an interview that was first published in 2017, mitigates neither the murder itself nor the fact that Bryant and Milam were acquitted of it.¹

Till’s murder made unmistakably clear that the violence, oppression, and economic exploitation of slavery were still very much alive in the segregated United States of the 1950s. And lest this truth be ignored or forgotten, Till’s mother, Mamie Till Mobley, insisted on publishing and distributing photographs of her son’s horribly disfigured face in the open coffin she chose for his funeral. The images, now easily found on the internet, are unspeakable. The brutality that they document fuelled the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Today, these photos recall a past that is still very much present.

In his essay *The Meaning of Working Through the Past*, a founding document of German efforts to confront Nazism in the postwar period, Theodor W. Adorno asks how it might be possible to move past historical violence without risking its repetition. “One wants to break free of the past; rightly, because nothing at all can live in its shadow, and because there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are repaid with guilt and violence; wrongly, because the past that one would like to evade is still very much alive.”² Indeed, it is not always easy to distinguish between a gesture that heals and one that repeats the original injury. The open debate that Adorno called for in Germany – and which commenced a decade after his text’s publication, in 1959 – is a first step, one that cannot be undertaken

1 Timothy B. Tyson. *The Blood of Emmett Till*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017.

2 Theodor W. Adorno. *The Meaning of Working Through the Past*. in: *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords*. Trans. Henry W. Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 89–104, here: p. 89.

without conflict. But should we set limits to such a dialogue, and to the cultural production that springs from it? Can an act of artistic creation ever prove destructive – and can an act of destruction ever be productive?

It is easy to see that, in the United States, the history of slavery is not a thing of the past: there are still more than fifteen hundred symbols of the Confederate Southern states in public spaces – monuments, flags, place names – which often celebrate this history.³ Calls to dismantle statues may sound alarmingly like iconoclasm, but many believe that their continued presence not only represents but sanctions Black oppression. And those campaigning for their preservation are often not art lovers, but rather white supremacists. This problem is hardly a new one, but it gained new urgency in 2017. On August 12 of that year, a peaceful counter-demonstrator named Heather Heyer was killed in Charlottesville, Virginia by white supremacists protesting the city's decision to dismantle a statue of confederate general Robert E. Lee. The man responsible for her death evidently valued Lee's statue over Heyer's life – a grisly reversal of iconoclasm. But is the violence attached to such statues only a problem for the art of the past? Or can a work from the present also continue the American history of oppression?

Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* and Hannah Black's Open Letter

"The painting must go." In the summer of 2017, this sentence echoed loudly throughout the New York art world; soon after, it was heard all over the world. The painting is *Open Casket*, one of several works by Dana Schutz in that year's Whitney Biennial, a kind of snapshot of American contemporary art that has been taking place since 1932. *Open Casket* is Schutz's abstract interpretation of the photograph showing Emmett Till in his coffin. Luscious colors replace the black-and-white of the original. Till's head, scarcely recognizable as a human face, is formed of thick layers of oil paint, his mouth a slash cut through them, as if Schutz had displaced the violence perpetrated against Till to the very materials of her art. The voice demanding that "the painting must go" belongs to Hannah Black. She, too, is an artist. The phrase repeats like a mantra through her open letter to the Whitney Museum, in which she condemns *Open Casket*. Her letter begins "with the urgent recommendation that the painting be destroyed and not entered into any market or museum."⁴

In this much-discussed letter, Black condemns the portrayal of Black suffering by a white artist. She sees this as an act of exploitation and violence perpetrated against Emmett Till's memory: "those non-Black artists who sincerely wish to highlight the shameful nature of white violence should first of all stop treating Black pain as raw material. The subject matter is not Schutz's; white free speech and white creative freedom have been

³ Gunter Booth, Jamie Kizzire and Cindy Kent. *Whose heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy*. Montgomery, Alabama: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017, p. 5.

⁴ Alex Greenberger. "The Painting Must Go." Hannah Black Pens Open Letter to the Whitney About Controversial Biennial Work. in: *Artnews*, 21 March 2017, <https://artnews.com/art-news/news/the-painting-must-go-hannah-black-pens-open-letter-to-the-whitney-about-controversial-biennial-work-7992> (accessed 19 July 2020).

founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights.”⁵ Together with the artist Parker Bright, who protested in front of the painting wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the words “BLACK DEATH SPECTACLE,” Black was one of the most visible critics of *Open Casket*, though they were hardly alone. Many artists and arts professionals supported the protest, as did some voices in the media. Critics of the painting consider Schutz’s portrayal of Till an act of cultural appropriation, a recapitulation and aestheticization of the violence that was done to him. A flurry of articles in magazines and newspapers further fuelled the debate. Some echoed Black’s arguments in the name of social justice, while others rejected them from the perspective freedom of speech, or defended Schutz’s painting on aesthetic grounds.

It is not surprising that this very American debate also received attention in Germany. Black’s refrain, “the painting must go,” sounds to many like a call to silence a voice attempting to face a dark past. Black’s critics call her perspective censorship – and censorship is anathema to liberal politics. In this case, however, to oppose “censorship” is to reject the voices of young people of color, whose own experiences of oppression, and of not being heard by society, are all too real. Perhaps it does matter who is speaking. I myself am a white American. I instinctively reject censorship, but it gave me pause to find myself dismissing these voices, voices that are so often ignored or forcibly silenced by white people. The protest against *Open Casket* is about perspectives – about whether a white artist can understand and convey the experience of Black Americans. I don’t understand all the objections that have been raised against Schutz’s painting. But neither do I understand what it is like to be Black.

The Liberal Problem with “Identity”

In the United States as well as in Germany, many liberals object to the idea that their identity might limit their ability to understand or speak for others. They believe that restricting what an artist should be “allowed” to represent is a dangerous curtailment of her freedom of speech. But one of Black’s central arguments is that Black Americans have always been subject to such restrictions, whether legally or socially enforced, and that it is therefore false to pretend they do not exist. In fact, the extreme freedom of speech that is championed in the U.S. is considered dangerous in Germany, where the state sets limits in order to protect the vulnerable from those who have the power to condemn them. In Germany, symbols of National Socialism are prohibited. In the U.S., the American Civil Liberties Union, an organization normally celebrated by the left, sometimes defends the freedoms of right-wing extremists, including, in a famous 1978 case, the right of American Nazis to march through a Jewish quarter of Chicago, swastikas flying. The far-right demonstration in Charlottesville was also carried out thanks to the ACLU, which successfully argued for its legality.

The fact that German Jews are given special consideration today – for example, that synagogues are protected by the police – is already a form of identity politics, a political

⁵ Ibid.

positioning based on the interests and perspectives of social groups, even if Germans sometimes consider this to be a specifically American approach. One German commentator explained the controversy surrounding *Open Casket* as follows: “As is usually the case today when an emotionally charged debate breaks out in the USA, it is about ‘identity politics.’”⁶ Perhaps the German anxiety behind this position is that the identity politics of the left can move dangerously close to the in-group nationalism of the right.

Particularly since the November 2016 elections that brought Donald Trump to the White House, a number of liberals have called for a reassessment of the priorities of the American Left, protesting that identity has become too central. In an article that received widespread attention in both the U.S. and Germany, historian Mark Lilla argues that “the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end.”⁷ Lilla believes that this focus on social identity fragmented the Democratic Party’s base, and sees its defeat precisely in Trump’s victory. Lilla believes that Hillary Clinton should have invoked broad categories – such as class – rather than addressing individual groups at campaign stops. And Lilla rejects the idea that white men constitute such a group at all: “The media’s newfound, almost anthropological, interest in the angry white male reveals as much about the state of our liberalism as it does about this much maligned, and previously ignored, figure.”⁸

Implied here is that identity politics has plunged “our liberalism” into a pathetic state if we have begun to see white masculinity as one identity among many, rather than as a broad majority. But this is simply wrong: there has always been an “anthropological interest” in every conceivable group except white men. The fact that today we are becoming aware that this, too, is an identity – and not simply a standard or default – proves the progress of identity politics, not its failure. If the Democratic Party had understood this earlier, the election might have turned out differently.

This is what identity politics is ultimately about: that there is no standard position. Only white men have had the luxury of believing that such a thing exists, because their identity is widely regarded as such. It is therefore striking that so many commentators, especially in Germany, have entered this debate as if from a universal point of view, which, at its core, invites us to reflect on whether this point of view is not rather a dangerous illusion. For some authors this seems to be a blind reflex, while others make a point of it: *That Dana Schutz is white has nothing to do with the choice of her subject; that I am white has nothing to do with my position in this controversy – I am only interested in the truth!* The problem is that truth itself has a subjective aspect that depends on enormously different experiences and stories. Defending the idea of a universal subject means denying these differences; being white becomes the norm, and white supremacy is merely the conscious defense of this unconscious attitude.

⁶ Andrea Köhler. Schwarzes Leid, weißer Blick. in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 6 April 2017, <https://nzz.ch/feuilleton/whitney-biennale-streit-um-ein-gemaelde-schwarzes-leid-weisser-blick-ld.155613> (accessed 19 July 2020).

⁷ Mark Lilla. The End of Identity Liberalism. in: *The New York Times*, 18 November 2016, <https://nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html> (accessed 19 July 2020).

⁸ Ibid.

I understand that many liberals are resistant to this understanding of identity; they wish to emphasize people’s connections, not our differences. I understand because I feel this resistance within myself, too. Is it not among the Enlightenment’s most important legacies that every person must be recognized as an individual, whose mind is capable of transcending her religion and culture? My liberal, progressive values rail against the notion that a universal subject is impossible – but that does not make this insight any less true. Oppression, genocide, and slavery, the dark side of the Enlightenment’s heritage, have annihilated the universal subjecthood that it promised. Insisting, therefore, that Black and white Americans live in the same country does not fight racism; it only normalizes it.

Historical violence remains real for the descendants of those who suffered it. I know this very well: my grandparents are Holocaust survivors, and I owe my own existence to a whole series of lucky breaks – for example, the fact that, shortly before the Łódź ghetto was liquidated, my grandfather boarded the train heading for a work camp and not the one destined for a death camp, thanks to a friend’s tip-off. Likewise, the fact that I am an American is a mere accident of fate: in the displaced persons camp where they met after the war, my grandparents also considered settling in Palestine or France. But while my nationality is more or less arbitrary, my Americanness has always seemed more central to my identity than my Judaism; my family is extremely secular, and before moving to Berlin, where I lived for three years, I had only inhabited large cities in the northeastern United States, where it is easy to consider antisemitism a problem of the past.

In April 2017, I visited my parents’ home just outside Philadelphia to celebrate Passover, a holiday so important that even my secular family observes it. As my mother and I prepared the traditional Seder meal, Trump was a constant topic of discussion. Mixing parsley and nutmeg into the matzo ball batter (my mother’s adaptation of a traditional recipe), I confessed that my eyes had been opened to the depths of antisemitism in the United States. The wave of anti-Jewish hatred that flared up after the 2016 election, which had apparently just been biding its time, proved how short-sighted it is to believe that, in the secular West, antisemitism exists only in history books or in the memories of survivors such as my grandparents. While I spoke, my mother – who, like me, was born in the U.S. and knows no other home – skimmed fat from the chicken soup and reflected for a moment. “We have been very lucky in this country so far,” she said. Her words made me see that it is naive to think that my Jewishness is not a primary aspect of my identity – that it has the power to define me, whether I want it to or not.

“Burning is Not an Option”

I can choose to celebrate Jewish holidays or ignore them, but in some ways my identity is not a choice. And one aspect of my identity – that of being white – is written on my skin. The most trenchant voices on both sides of the Schutz/Black controversy acknowledged this inescapable aspect of identity. Among them was Coco Fusco, a Cuban-American artist whose work and writings seek to expose the colonial power structures that keep cultural identity at the forefront of our experiences. In 1992, she and artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña performed a now-infamous work in multiple Western cities called *Two Undiscovered*

Amerindians Visit the West. Fusco and Gómez-Peña presented themselves to their audience in a cage, dressed up as authentic “natives” of a fictional island in the Gulf of Mexico. Their traditional garb encompassed grass skirts as well as designer sunglasses, and their “traditional tasks” (such as watching TV or sewing voodoo dolls) were interpreted by an accompanying text in pseudo-scientific language that parodied the ignorant and insulting assumptions to which people of color of all backgrounds are exposed in the West. The two artists expected that this work might generate controversy; they did not guess that their seemingly obvious satire would engender the colonialist relations it meant to critique. As Fusco reported, “a substantial portion of the public believed that our fictional identities are real ones” – and took the public imprisonment of the “natives” in stride.⁹

Fusco is a teacher; her experiences with non-white art students, who worry that their cultural identity might overwhelm the interpretation of their work, figure prominently in her article, which addresses Black’s letter. Although she does not defend the painting itself, Fusco opposes Black’s call for the painting to be removed from view or destroyed. Among other things, she criticizes Black for presuming to be able to speak for all Black people, uncritically rejecting abstraction as a form of social protest, and spuriously insinuating that Schutz was motivated by greed (it is not wrong for artists to make a living from their work). Fusco also counters Black’s insinuation that Mamie Till wanted her son’s photographs to be distributed only to a Black audience, a point with which Black bolsters her argument that Schutz’s subject does not “belong” to her. Indeed, there is no doubt that Mamie Till also wanted to show the pictures to whites – and not only to racists like those who had killed her son, but also to those tolerant liberals who might, in the name of moving on from the past, wish to minimize the depths of racial hatred that persisted in the United States nearly a century after slavery ended.

Yet I believe that, on one crucial point, Fusco is wrong. By demanding that the painting not only be removed from public view, but that it also be destroyed, Fusco writes, “Black and company are placing themselves on the wrong side of history, together with Phalangists who burned books, authoritarian regimes that censor culture and imprison artists, and religious fundamentalists who ban artworks in the name of their god.”¹⁰ This argument was also heard from many white liberals in the course of this controversy: while they supported Black artists’ to protest, the call to destroy art simply goes too far. In response to a Twitter comment calling for *Open Casket* to be burned, Brigitte Werneburg wrote indignantly in the Berlin newspaper *die tageszeitung*: “Burning [...] is not an option” (“Verbrennen [...] geht gar nicht”).¹¹

Any discussion about the destruction of a work of art is alarming, and rightly so. Americans are just as familiar as Germans with Heinrich Heine’s famous admonition: “Where

⁹ Coco Fusco. The Other History of Intercultural Performance. in: *TDR / The Drama Review*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1994, pp. 143–167, here: p. 143.

¹⁰ Coco Fusco. Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go. On Dana Schutz’s Image of Emmett Till. in: *Hyperallergic*, 27 March 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/368290/censorship-not-the-painting-must-go-on-dana-schutzs-image-of-emmett-till> (accessed 19 July 2020).

¹¹ Brigitte Werneburg. Schwarzes Leid als Material. in: *die tageszeitung*, 30 March 2017, <https://taz.de/!5394709> (accessed 19 July 2020).

they burn books, they will ultimately burn people.”¹² But in this case, the idea evoked by Werneburg, Fusco and others is distorted: we are not dealing with the mere threat of violence in the story of *Open Casket*, but with its fact. Moreover, we must not confuse the historical perpetrators of such violence with their victims. Lives have been destroyed, including Emmett Till’s. In view of his death – a cruel murder that, still more cruelly, failed to spark that coming to terms with the past (the German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) that could have prevented the deaths of Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Jordan Edwards, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Akai Gurley, Trayvon Martin, Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott and Alton Sterling – it seems hypocritical to insist on the inviolability of white art.¹³ We would all prefer if Schutz’s skin color were irrelevant, but it is not – and it will not be, not until Black’s is, too.

For this reason, Fusco is wrong to compare Black with authoritarian regimes. There is a difference, and that difference is power. Unlike regimes that have the power to make their threats of violence a reality, Black – a female artist of color without institutional authority – is not in a position to do so. She speaks from a historically disempowered position and, unlike an authoritarian regime or influential institution, she cannot implement the destruction she demands. This is the crucial point that is missing in this discussion: whether Black means her call for destruction literally or rhetorically, it can only be understood as the latter, as a gesture of righteous anger. Black’s powerlessness in the face of racial violence reminds us of the risks we take in silencing minority voices that sometimes sound unreasonable or extreme.

Black is not the first artist to call for the destruction of a work of art in the name of justice. Another effective example can be found in Horst Hoheisel’s *Ein unübersehbares Zeichen* (*An unmistakable sign*, 1995), a competition entry for Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. The commission was ultimately given to Peter Eisenman’s striking landscape of black, coffin-like plinths, now a well-known tourist destination a stone’s throw from the Brandenburg Gate, an 18th century monument to Prussian military might. Hoheisel’s controversial proposal aimed not to create a new landmark, but to destroy an old one: he proposed to grind the Brandenburg Gate to dust and scatter it on the site assigned to the new monument. Hoheisel’s design replaced the bombastic presence of a traditional monument with its conspicuous absence. It represents an extreme example of what American historian James E. Young has called the “counter-monument,” a memorial that emphasizes loss over triumph, the failure of memory over the continuity of histo-

¹² “[...] dort, wo man Bücher / verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen.” Heinrich Heine. *Almanzor. Eine Tragödie*. in: *Almanzor. William Ratcliff. Der Rabbi von Bacherach. Aus den Memoiren des Herren von Schnabelewopski. Florentinische Nächte* (Sämtliche Werke. Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke, vol. 5), ed. Manfred Windfuhr. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1994, pp. 7–68, here: p. 16. This quotation, taken from Heine’s 1821 play, refers to the burning of the Quran during the Spanish Inquisition.

¹³ This list of Black Americans killed by police officers, highly abbreviated in 2017, is now woefully out of date. There are no official figures on how many civilians have been killed by police officers; however, the Guardian has unofficial documentation of killings by police in the U.S. from 1995 and 2016: The Guardian: *The Counted. People Killed by Police in the US*, <https://theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database> (accessed 19 July 2020).

ry.¹⁴ Like Black, Hoheisel insists that no creation can make up for the loss of human life. Burning was an option after all; Hoheisel's project, however, was not. At no time did his contribution pose a threat to the Brandenburg Gate, because he was never in a position to grind it up, nor could he have expected to win the competition. The power of his gesture is therefore its paradox: the destruction of the gate is at the same time too much to ask, and too little to compensate for the murder of the six million. In its impotence, it reminds us of the fundamental question of all identity politics, which Black also faces: it is not only a question of who gets to speak, but also who is really heard.

Censorship Now!!

That histories of oppression complicate the notion of censorship was, coincidentally, the theme of another work in the same Whitney Biennial, which was on display just a few steps away from *Open Casket*. Frances Stark's Ian F. Svenonius's "*Censorship Now*" for the 2017 Whitney Biennial (2017) takes up much more exhibition space than Schutz's painting and is a more deliberately polemical work, but received comparatively little attention in the press. Stark used eight large canvases like spreads from a book, copying out, word for word, the title essay of a funny and pugnacious little tome by Svenonius, an underground musician and even lesser-known author. *Censorship Now!!* inveighs against unfettered freedom of speech, insisting that "We need censorship today" – especially "Censorship of the arts, whose special status of immunity from culpability explains and excuses the degenerate ideology that makes all this 'freedom' possible."¹⁵

Stark initially picked up the book because she found its title provocative, and has addressed the discomfort it inspires. "It is the most rankling, uncomfortable phrase that you could imagine having to deal with as an artist or a creative person or someone who finds themselves in a museum," she said.¹⁶ But by committing the entire essay to canvas (and not just its disturbing title) in large letters in a large museum, Stark makes it difficult to ignore Svenonius' message. And if one reads even a few lines of the text, it quickly becomes clear that he is not concerned with censorship as we usually understand it. Instead of censorship from above, dictated by governments, powerful institutions, or the financial elite, he advocates "a people's censorship, a grassroots censorship, an insurgent censorship" – censorship from below.¹⁷ Svenonius reminds us that however passionately we might believe in "freedom of speech," some people's speech remains freer than that of others. Quality and expertise, nebulous notions though they are, often have little to do with success in art, literature, music, and even journalism, the dissemination of which depends on the connections, financial resources, and, of course, the identity of the creator, whether

¹⁴ James E. Young. The Counter-Monument. Memory against Itself in Germany Today. in: *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1992, pp. 267–96.

¹⁵ Ian F. Svenonius. *Censorship Now*. in: *Censorship Now!!*. New York: Akashic Books, 2015, pp. 15–27, here: p. 15.

¹⁶ Frances Stark. Audio guide stop for Frances Stark. Whitney Biennial 2017, <http://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/AudioGuides/40?stop=24> (accessed 19 July 2020).

¹⁷ Svenonius 2015, p. 25.

based on skin color, gender, religion, or something else. Instead of accepting this passively, Svenonius urges, “we the people” should actively support that which we believe deserves a platform – as Stark did when she gave him hers – and also speak out against what we find unacceptable.

What might such a “grassroots censorship” look like? Hannah Black’s letter provides one possibility. Seen through the lens of Svenonius and Stark’s unconventional approach to freedom of speech, Black’s call for “censorship” is fundamentally different from the machinations of media conglomerates, repressive governments, and wealthy art patrons. It is a plea for the redistribution of freedom of speech, and a reminder that the murder of Emmett Till is not a thing of the past, but rather determines our present.

Adorno concludes his essay thus: “The past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.”¹⁸ As long as America’s racist past is still alive, as long as it continues to destroy the lives and livelihoods of Black Americans, we must understand this call for censorship not as an act of destruction, but as a memorial to what has already been destroyed.

2017/2020

¹⁸ Adorno 2005, p. 103.

