

Images of destruction, destruction of images: a political iconology of iconoclasm in the 21st century

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Abstract

The paths of critical heritage theory and contemporary art have never been more intertwined, particularly at the intersections where the destruction of images and representation of these destructions are concerned. In this scenario, the roles artists, critics and viewers play regarding the production and reception of images of destruction in the 21st century have become blurred. Although these images of destruction originate in media they eventually become part of exhibitions in art venues and galleries; they refer to our history and our past, by precisely destroying it. In examining these images, this paper argues that the discourse of heritage is summoned by artists (and creators) who include in their work issues of death, destruction and disappearance to represent the loss of memory, culture, identity or history—in many instances prompted by governments and authoritarian regimes. The paper examines case studies of artists who explore death, loss and destruction to outline the way they rupture the links between critics, artists and viewers, but at the same time, they enforce them. By presenting a range of perspectives from critical heritage, contemporary art, and transdisciplinary practitioners, the paper will answer the following questions: Are these images of destruction part of the essential heritage of the 21st century? If so, what critiques are they ensuing? What are the possibilities to consider contemporary forms of art as a critical heritage? What function do these images of destruction play in the art world?