

## Iconoclasm Makes Images

Julian Stallabrass

Preface to Adeela Suleman/ Mariam Ali Baig, eds., *Art Violence and the State in the Killing Fields of Karachi*, 2022, pp. 11-13.

Acts of iconoclasm—in more or less ironic circumstances—often emit other images, even when the perpetrators have a visceral hatred of representation. The mutilated statues of the Middle Ages still stand or lie in English churches, and in millions of snapshots, as reminders of religious fanaticism. Cheap prints from the time of the English Civil War documented and celebrated the Protestants' toppling monuments and their bonfires of the idols.



Adeela Suleman, *The Killing Fields of Karachi*, as installed at the 2019 Karachi Biennale

Usually these images and ruins are like echoes of the originals, being fainter, blurrier, wavering and fading; documents as against monuments; paper as against stone, canvas or stained glass. The case of the destruction of Adeela Suleman's work offers an exception, in part because of the grotesque actions of the state in sending its agents to censor and then destroy the artist's monument to those murdered by the police; and in part because of her subsequent response, and that of many others. Since this monument had a funerary air, and indeed had an affinity with Peter Eisenman's powerful Holocaust memorial in Berlin with its array of slabs on which people

often leave flowers, it was as if the state, not content with killing, was compelled to repeat its crime by violating the graves of its victims. And then it was incompetent enough to allow various people to surreptitiously document the proceedings: the shattered columns strewn about the ground, the broken remains laboriously loaded onto trucks and carried away, as if the fragments were dangerous contaminants, radiating dissent.



When the police murder with impunity it is of course meant to send out among the population a chilling terror, freezing thought, speech and action. It is telling that even the leaders of the Karachi Biennial who had approved Suleman's work, were not immune but distanced themselves from its too-overt politics. Let alone Afaq Mirza, the Director General of the Karachi Municipal Corporation who defended police actions with inadvertent black comedy: "This is not art; this is vandalism; this is giving the wrong picture of Pakistan." Since it is apparently overly utopian to think that Pakistan's reputation might be improved by preventing the police from executing people without trial, it will have to be improved by keeping it quiet. Such attitudes were all the more foolish because in Bangladesh the recent example of Shahidul Alam showed exactly what happens when the state persecutes a well-known artist who has protested, among other issues, illegal police killings.

One parallel occurs: a protestor called Brian Haw camped out for years on Parliament Square to personally protect his makeshift monument which protested against the sanctions and then the war against Iraq. His strange arte-povera-like assembly of photographic horrors and children's toys confronted legislators daily with the terrible consequences of their lying and war-mongering. Their response was to pass new laws specifically to make his once-legal protest illegal, and the police arrived in the night to break up and remove Haw's assemblage.

In response, Mark Wallinger made a precise replica, which he called *State Britain*, and installed it in Tate Britain, carefully positioned so as to cross into the new zone of illegality that extended from the Parliament building. This recreation was now protected by the label 'art' and by its position in the sleek, neo-classical and imperial gallery rooms. This was back in 2007, and it seemed inconceivable then that the police should arrive to repeat their actions.



Mark Wallinger, *State Britain*, 2007, as installed at Tate Britain

We might be less confident of that now, as right-wing populism often allied with religious conservatism spreads, and chooses culture as one of the main grounds for its cultivation of hatred and antagonism. We have seen many acts of censorship and even destruction, and many more of intimidation and self-censorship. In this way, Suleman's monument, its demolition, her subsequent works and this book, speak widely, far beyond Pakistan and its region, to all who would confront the forces of fear, fanaticism and state violence, and to all those who imagine and strive for a better world.