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### Journal Item

How to cite:

Wainwright, Leon (2014). Disturbing pasts: memories, controversies and creativity. Open Arts Journal(3)

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2014s01lw>

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# DISTURBING PASTS: MEMORIES, CONTROVERSIES AND CREATIVITY. INTRODUCTION.

Leon Wainwright

## Abstract

*This themed issue of the Open Arts Journal, 'Disturbing pasts: Memories, controversies and creativity', brings together a range of artists, curators, policy-makers and academics from around the world, who explore creative engagements with controversial and traumatic pasts in art practice, curating and museums. The material is presented in three parts: 'Difficult Pasts and Public Space' (writings on historical issues and museums), 'Visual Investigations' (artists' statements and criticism), and 'Collaborations' (visual analysis and artist-scholar pairings of writings and original artworks). This collection was developed through a two-year international research project led by Leon Wainwright, which involved three consortia of researchers from universities throughout Europe, and focused on a major public event at the Museum of Ethnology Vienna/ Weltmuseum, Wien (November 2011). The project is funded by HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area, the European Science Foundation).*

**Keywords:** interdisciplinarity, museums, policy-making, cultural policy, difficult pasts, trauma, public space, creativity, controversy, memory, commemoration

**DOI:** [dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2014s01lw](https://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2014s01lw)

## Biography

Leon Wainwright is Kindler Chair in Global Contemporary Art at Colgate, New York, Reader in Art History at The Open University, UK, and Academic Visitor at the University of Oxford's Department of History of Art and School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography. He is co-editor (with Beccy Kennedy and Alnoor Mitha) of *Triennial City: Localising Asian Art* (Cornerhouse, 2014), and the forthcoming anthology (with Øivind Fuglerud, University of Oslo) *Objects and Imagination: Perspectives on Materialization and Meaning* (Berghahn, 2015). He is the author of *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester University Press, 2011) and a recipient of the Philip Leverhulme Prize for the history of art.

An earlier version of this material was presented on the occasion of the project conference 'Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity' (20 -22 November 2012, Museum of Ethnology/Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna). To view the film footage on the Open Arts Archive, [www.openartsarchive.org](http://www.openartsarchive.org), follow this link: <http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaa/archive/947>

'Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity' is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme 'Humanities as a Source of Creativity and Innovation', co-funded by AHRC, AKA, DASTI, ETF, FNR, FWF, HAZU, IRCHSS, MHEST, NWO, RANNIS, RCN, VR and the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 235366/291827.



Co-funded by  
the European Union

# DISTURBING PASTS: MEMORIES, CONTROVERSIES AND CREATIVITY. INTRODUCTION.

Leon Wainwright, Colgate, New York  
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Thus the subject-matter of history is in an important sense not fact but possibility, not past but future; or, more precisely past possibilities and prospects, past conceptions of the future: futures past.

David Carr (1987)<sup>1</sup>

In many countries, legacies of war, colonialism, genocide and oppression return again and again to dominate contemporary culture, politics and society. The controversies surrounding traumatic pasts can shape policy, make or break governments, trigger mass demonstrations, and even spark violent confrontation. These pasts also inspire creative means by which the past is remembered, remade and challenged. This, the third issue of the *Open Arts Journal*, explores the theme of traumatic pasts and their complex and often dramatic influences on the present day, bringing to the foreground the rich visual and creative responses to such pasts that issue among artists. Much as David Carr has characterised the future horizons of possibility, the material collected here carries suggestions for effective ways that such 'disturbing' pasts may be confronted, so that settled or consensual views may in turn be disturbed, troubled and transformed.

Contributors to this volume are keen to register the important idea that any meaningful encounter with the past has to be felt at the personal level, no matter how difficult to recall and painful to represent, however contested or fraught with risk and freighted with emotion. They demonstrate how recollecting stories of that kind is a complex and ongoing task, moreover, that the process requires a joint effort between artists, curators and academics when trying to confront dominant historical narratives and shape alternative interpretations. As the contributions show, these histories are challenging at all levels: personal, collective, institutional. Certainly, such attempts to 'disturb' a settled picture of the past may call upon an individual's

<sup>1</sup> David Carr review of Reinhart Koselleck's 'Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time' in *History and Theory* (1987) vol.26, no.2, pp.197-204 (p.198).

creativity, courage and sensitivity as well as specialist or institutional knowledge. But such endeavours are significantly strengthened through harnessing a *shared* will to re-assess the past. This requires an effective exchange of knowledge with a high degree of comparison and empathy, and careful measures to balance a range of often competing priorities.

## Confronting the past: A shared project

The editors of this issue share an interdisciplinary background in memory conflicts in Eastern Europe (Blacker); the visualisation of colonial pasts in public narratives of history (Edwards); and the cultural understanding of images and objects in the context of globalisation and postcolonialism (Wainwright). Their coming together was the occasion of a major knowledge exchange project that focused on a three-day event at the Museum of Ethnology, Vienna (subsequently renamed Weltmuseum Wien) in 2012. Sponsored by Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA, European Science Foundation) in relation to three research strands under their auspices, the project drew on the energies of individuals from the arts and heritage sectors and the wider public.<sup>2</sup> This diverse range of creative practitioners, including artists and photographers, curators, cultural policy-makers, and academics together explored museums, public and other types of space for what they offer as venues for responses to difficult and traumatic histories. The event saw oral presentations and, in response, as organisers we feel that this selection of the presentations – the majority of them in the form of scholarly articles, developed through a process of rigorous peer-review – will illuminate the distinctive perspectives that emerged. Further, taking advantage of the digital open access medium, the speakers' presentations and discussion with the public who attended in Vienna are cross-referenced (by clickable hyperlinks), to each author's contribution.

The Disturbing Pasts project was made possible by a formal collaboration between individuals from countries around the world. It was underpinned by the coming together of three groupings of researchers at universities throughout Europe, the consortia:

<sup>2</sup> Members of the organising committee for the project were: Principal Investigator Dr Leon Wainwright (The Open University, UK and Colgate, New York), Dr Barbara Plankensteiner (Museum of Ethnology, Vienna/Weltmuseum Wien), Julia Binter (Weltmuseum Wien/ University of Oxford), Dr Maruska Svasek (Queen's University, Belfast), Professor Elizabeth Edwards (De Montfort University, Leicester), Dr Uilleam Blacker (University College London) and Professor Alexander Etkind (University of Cambridge).

'Memory at War' (MAW),<sup>3</sup> 'Photographs, Colonial Legacy and Museums in Contemporary European Culture' (PhotoCLEC),<sup>4</sup> and 'Creativity and Innovation in a World of Movement' (CIM).<sup>5</sup> All these projects addressed contested, challenging and disturbing histories and the role of creativity within them.

The 'Memory at War' (MAW) project set out to expand the boundaries of Memory Studies by shifting the focus to post-socialist Eastern Europe. The 'memory boom' that has overtaken Western Europe and North America at both a popular and scholarly level since the last decades of the 20th century has centred overwhelmingly on West European memories of the Holocaust and Nazism. Meanwhile, East European memories of the 20th century, which differ sharply in both form and content, often contradicting and clashing with their West European counterparts, have been relatively under-studied. MAW, which brought together researchers from the UK, Norway, Estonia, Finland and the Netherlands, as well as from the region under study, aimed to address this emerging dichotomy between West and East European memory. With a focus on three main target countries, Poland, Russia and Ukraine, the project's international team of scholars mapped and analysed the dynamics of cultural memory in the region, and developed new tools and concepts for approaching and understanding memory in Eastern Europe. The team focused on the interplay between memory, identity and political developments more broadly in this region, and the topic of the present volume – cultural representations in their public context, commemorative art, and in particular museums – were at the heart of the project's activities. While the project's main aim was to analyse developments in the context of Eastern Europe, it also set out to use that context in order to investigate and refine the field of Memory Studies itself.

'Photographs, Colonial Legacy and Museums in Contemporary European Culture' (PhotoCLEC) was an international research project studying the role of the photographic legacy of colonialism in the contested histories of contemporary European multi-cultural identities. Partners from the UK, the Netherlands and Norway explored this through museums, as these are major sites for historical narrative making and dissemination. Overall, the project showed that despite the centrality of the colonial past to European identities, its presence in public narratives of history was seen as deeply challenging. The resistance to these

narratives, and particularly the unstable possibilities of photographs within them, pointed to a collective amnesia or even a structured forgetting of such histories. Significantly, these responses manifested themselves differently in each of the European research sites. Conversely, other engagements with photograph collections revealed the inclusion of the histories of postcolonial immigrants and repatriates from all over the world in contemporary European history in ways that challenge the grand narrative of national citizenship made in Europe. Such responses also force us to think of museums beyond the notion of national tools of empire. PhotoCLEC thereby offers the insight that photographs in museums enable us to rethink how mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in society, European as well as colonial, connect with feelings of belonging and estrangement within the contemporary postcolonial societies in Europe.

'Creativity and Innovation in a World of Movement' (CIM) explored the dynamics of cultural production and creativity in an era of intensifying globalisation and transnational connectivity, conducted by a team of scholars in the United Kingdom, Norway, the Netherlands and Austria. Instead of assessing the relative novelty of end products, the project took a processual approach by analysing practices of appropriation, consumption and (re)contextualisation in the spheres of (popular) art, religion and museums. Acknowledging the significance of individual or group-specific understandings of 'creativity', CIM explored critically how different notions of cultural value and processes of authentication, authorisation and commoditisation have affected people's engagements with objects and images. A broad perspective was obtained by investigating concrete, partially interlinked processes across five continents, following successful ethnographic fieldwork in India, Sri Lanka, Ghana, Argentina, Brazil, Barbados, Trinidad, Suriname, Guyana, Canada, Australia, Norway, France, Austria and the UK.

Each consortium of researchers that offered the background to *Disturbing Pasts* has examined diverse critical perspectives on selected modern histories, in order to highlight and problematise their continuing contemporary significance. The ground that they share is identified in this volume through three groupings of material, as follows.

Part I, 'Difficult Pasts and Public Space', presents articles relating to historical concerns as they have arisen through contexts of display in museums and galleries. The theme cuts across the lives and professional involvements of a range of authors who evaluate colonial histories and the record of innovations (and difficulties) that has ensued in the

3 <http://www.memoryatwar.org/>

4 <http://photoclec.dmu.ac.uk/>

5 <http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/CreativityandInnovationinaWorldofMovement>

process of tackling such pasts, often through strategic partnerships with artists. Senior researcher (for the Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative, University of Cape Town, South Africa) Anette Hoffmann's 'Echoes of the Great War: The recordings of African prisoners in the First World War' examines what the interpretation of archival materials such as voice recordings may tell us about the historical memory of communities in Africa whose ancestors were conscripted into World War I. A related concern to the sharing of traumas and memories of European contact in Africa, is treated by museum curator Clara Himmelheber (Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum of the Cultures of the World, Cologne, Germany) in her essay 'The exhibition *Namibia-Germany: a shared/divided history. Resistance, violence, memory*'. Curator and academic Carol Tulloch's (University of the Arts, London) 'A riot of our own: A reflection on agency', expounds on the significance of the author's Caribbean descent and her Britishness for setting the parameters of an on-going challenge to dominant 'truths' about people of the African diaspora. In an extended article, she reports on recent exhibitions that have brought new audiences into museums and exposed the vital 'conjunctive' nature of black and white cultural histories and heritage. A constructive overview of how Norway has recently tackled issues of heritage is given by cultural policy-maker Liv Ramskjær (Norway) in her 'Break! On the unpleasant, the marginal, the taboo and the controversial in Norwegian museums'. 'Making meaning from a fragmented past: 1897 and the creative process' by Peju Layiwola (Lagos, Nigeria) shows how historical episodes of violence and the removal of cultural property – a British punitive expedition of 1897 – have been explored in Layiwola's own creative practice, and that of her peers, in furtive attempts to keep the issue of colonial exploitation open. Finally, the political historian Susan Legêne (Netherlands), in her 'Mallaby's car: Colonial subjects, imperial actors, and the representation of human suffering in postcolonial exhibitions', addresses the complex story of decolonisation evidenced by photographs taken in Surabaya in Indonesia in 1945 during the uprising against the restoration of Dutch colonial rule.

Part 2, 'Visual Investigations', features artists' essays and statements, and works of cultural criticism. In particular, it offers an exploratory look at the value of visual materials and creative processes for considering colonial pasts, as well as postcolonial, diaspora or minority ethnicity communities in their continuing attempts to come to terms with difficult histories. The lawyer Malte Jaguttis and Berlin-based artist Dierk Schmidt offer a collaborative reflection on art practice

and archival research, 'Comments on the art and research project "The division of the earth – Tableaux on the legal synopses of the Berlin Africa Conference"'.

In 'Late photography, military landscapes and the politics of memory', art historian Simon Faulkner (Manchester Metropolitan University) employs methods from visual culture studies in a critical debate on the Cold War and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, addressing photographs by Simon Norfolk, Angus Boulton, Gilad Ophir and Roi Kuper. Maruška Svašek (Queen's University, Belfast) collaborated with several artists, including Sophie Ernst, in a deep emotional and creative exploration of concepts of 'home' and 'homeland', which she analyses in her 'Forced displacement, suffering and the aesthetics of loss' alongside the politics of public commemoration surrounding the post-World War II expulsion of ethnic Germans from the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. Concluding this part of the collection, the artist John Timberlake (Middlesex University, London) in his 'Nuclear war as false memory' outlines aspects of his own creative practices which highlight discontinued historical trajectories. Timberlake expresses his fascination for the 'fictions of nuclear war' – a war that never happened and so became the subject of 'false memory'. He shows how the cultural legacy of Britain's nuclear test programme of the 1950s and '60s may be explored meaningfully in his paintings and photography resulting from archival research at the Imperial War Museum in London.

Part 3, 'Collaborations', comprises studies in visual analysis that have benefited directly from artist-scholar pairings. Focusing on Poland, the Gdańsk-born artist Rafał Betlejewski takes a more performative approach, and his text here – entitled 'I miss you, Jew!' – is a brief meditation alongside the artist's provocative photographic works on Poland's 'absent' Jewish presence. Literary scholar Uilleam Blacker (University College London) provides a nuanced account of this latter creative practice in his 'Spatial dialogues and the memory of absent Jews in contemporary Polish art', drawing attention to how the artworks by Betlejewski, Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska and Israeli artist Yael Bartana have confronted Jewish and Holocaust histories by linking the Polish context to wider Holocaust discourse and other historical and geographical contexts. A pairing of works by the artist Bente Geving (Norway) – her text 'Margit Ellinor: Forgotten images' – and that by art historian Sigrid Lien (Bergen, Norway) – 'A comment on contemporary Sámi art' – underscore how processes of making and showing art can be effective and integral to autobiography. Geving's intimate account of her Sámi lineage and the

domestic collecting habits of her mother are the focus of a distinctive photographic practice which reveals how her family's identity was privately constructed in the everyday objects and organisation of the home. Lien writes about this body of works by Geving as a new mode of historicity, whereby the raw material of photographs articulates 'a sense of memory loss'. A final artist-scholar pairing comes from Heather Kamarra Shearer (South Australia) and anthropologist Fiona Magowan (Queen's University, Belfast) which frames matters of justice and the issue of 'intercultural trauma'. Shearer's 'Troubled traces: Painting and displaying intercultural traumas of Aboriginality' offers an arresting personal reflection on her life experience as one of the 'stolen generation' of Aboriginal Australians, the inspiration for her vocation in the field of legal rights and her practice as a painter. In her 'Empowering art: Reconfiguring narratives of trauma and hope in the Australian national imaginary' Magowan draws on her longitudinal ethnographic research in this field, bringing into sharp focus how Aboriginal history has been vocalised in entirely new terms among contemporary artists.

### About the editors

Uilleam Blacker is a Lecturer in Comparative Russian and East European Culture at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London. He was previously a postdoctoral research associate on the project Memory at War (HERA JRP), based at the University of Cambridge, from where he participated in the Disturbing Pasts project. His current research focuses on the memories of communities that disappeared from cities across east-central Europe as a result of the Second World War, as reflected in urban commemoration, literature and art. His general research interests include contemporary Ukrainian, Polish and Russian literatures, and memory, gender, urban and postcolonial studies. Uilleam has also translated the work of several contemporary Ukrainian writers.

Elizabeth Edwards is Research Professor of Photographic History and Director of the Photographic History Research Centre, De Montfort University, UK, where she specialises in the social and material practices of photography. She was Project Leader of the HERA-funded project PhotoCLEC which finished in March 2012. She has held curatorial and academic posts in Oxford and London and has worked extensively on the relationships between photography, anthropology and history in cross-cultural environments. Her monographs and edited works include *Anthropology and*

*Photography* (1992), *Raw Histories* (2001), *Photographs Objects Histories* (2004), and *Sensible Objects* (2006). Her most recent book, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination 1885-1918* was published by Duke University Press in 2012.

Leon Wainwright is Kindler Chair in Global Contemporary Art at Colgate, New York, Reader in Art History at The Open University, UK, and Academic Visitor at the University of Oxford's Department of History of Art and the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography. He is co-editor (with Beccy Kennedy and Alnoor Mitha) of *Triennial City: Localising Asian Art* (Cornerhouse, 2014), and the forthcoming anthology (with Øivind Fuglerud, University of Oslo) *Objects and Imagination: Perspectives on Materialization and Meaning* (Berghahn, 2015), and author of *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester University Press, 2011). He is Principal Investigator of the Disturbing Pasts project, and a recipient of the Philip Leverhulme Prize for the history of art.

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