

The Art of Democracy

Currently on display in Los Angeles is the exhibition, *MONUMENTS*, a collection of decommissioned Confederate monuments — from untouched to heavily vandalized — displayed in conjunction with contemporary artworks.¹ In 2020, the death of George Floyd sparked a national reckoning over systemic racism and violence, leading to the removal or replacement of around 100 Confederate statues.² *MONUMENTS* captures America's shifting political stance and the role of art within it, arriving during President Trump's second term, when several Confederate monuments have recently been reinstated.³ This tension between art and political forces is not new. Art has long been a catalyst in helping citizens engage with political issues.⁴

In the United States, art has functioned as a tool to articulate the public's political needs, serving as a conduit within democratic governance. For example, during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, art became one of the few ways in which ostracized people could reclaim their power. Artists and their collectives like the Gran Fury collective utilized guerilla techniques such as posterizing to shed light on the growing epidemic, which was being ignored by their own government.⁵ President Ronald Reagan avoided the topic, only coming to mention AIDS publicly in 1985 and giving his first speech on it in 1987.⁶ In the face of governmental silence and inaction, art became a tool of political and social change.

The health of a democracy is directly related to the freedom of its art. In open societies, it is possible for artists to express themselves and for the arts to thrive publicly. Historically, the suppression of creative activity is often one of the first steps in a campaign to eliminate free speech and the right to protest.⁷ During Francisco Franco's 40-year dictatorial rule in Spain, starting in 1939, artists and writers found their regional culture suppressed in favor of Catholic and nationalist ideology. Those in opposition to the regime were either exiled, imprisoned, or silenced for their dissent.⁸ On the other hand, art has also been used as a vessel to disseminate authoritarian propaganda. Under Mao Zedong's rule in China, traditional art was condemned,

¹ The Brick, "Monuments," The Brick, 2025, <https://the-brick.org/monuments>.

² Rachel Treisman, "Nearly 100 Confederate Monuments Removed in 2020, Report Says; More than 700 Remain," NPR, February 23, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/23/970610428/nearly-100-confederate-monuments-removed-in-2020-report-says-more-than-700-remain>.

³ Anastasia Tsioulcas, "A Confederate Statue Toppled in Washington, D.C., in 2020 Has Been Reinstalled," NPR, October 27, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/10/27/nx-s1-5587824/confederate-statue-albert-pike-trump>.

⁴ Malaika Cunningham and Marit Hammond, "Arts-Based Approaches to Democracy: Reinvigorating the Public Sphere," *Politics* 46, no. 1 (April 1, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957251324529>.

⁵ Jasmine Kuylenstierna, "Queer Activist Art," *Metmuseum.org*, June 7, 2024, <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/act-up-gran-fury>.

⁶ Joseph Bennington-Castro, "How AIDS Remained an Unspoken—but Deadly—Epidemic for Years | HISTORY," *HISTORY*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.history.com/articles/aids-epidemic-ronald-reagan>.

⁷ Patrick Fisher, "When the Arts Are Attacked, Democracy Is at Risk," *Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council*, April 14, 2025, <https://www.pittsburghartscouncil.org/blog/when-arts-are-attacked-democracy-risk>.

⁸ Fisher, "When the Arts Are Attacked"

and in its place appeared Communist-friendly works that praised Mao's administration as "prosperous."⁹ In reality, millions were being persecuted, disappeared, or starved.¹⁰

Today, art and democracy continue to complement each other. Art is necessary for a democracy to function as intended by influencing and promoting public civic engagement. A society that champions creative freedom shows a commitment to open discourse, while a society that censors their artists censors the truth.

⁹ BBC, "Seeing Red: The Propaganda Art of China's Cultural Revolution," BBC, February 12, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/44hl41NY7Mb4Jx4tPJpzwty/seeing-red-the-propaganda-art-of-china-s-cultural-revolution>.

¹⁰ Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Great Leap Backward," New York Times, February 16, 1997, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/02/16/reviews/970216.16ebersta.html>