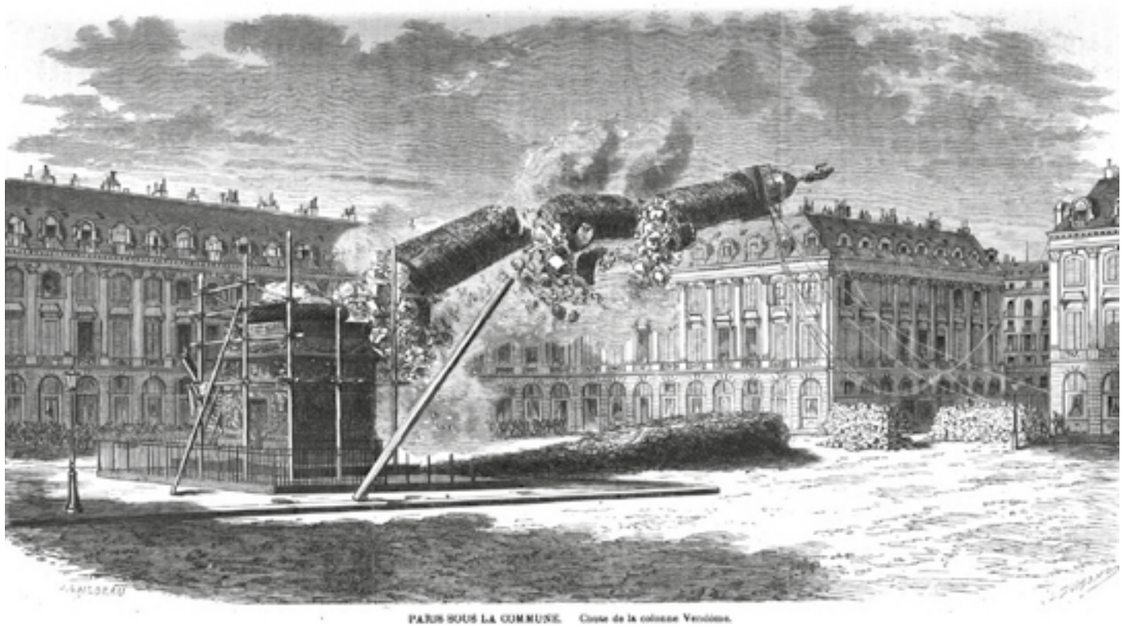
RE-ANIMATING THE MONUMENTAL SPIRIT OF SOLIDARITY OF THE PARIS COMMUNE FROM TUNIS TO RÉUNION ISLAND

JOACHIM BEN YAKOUB



"Paris during the Commune. Fall of the Vendôme Column." / Drawing by J. Gaildrau (1871).

In the wake of a plethora of colonial and imperial monument ceremonialized destructions, the demolition of the Vendôme Column by the Paris Commune appears as paradigmatic. Joachim Ben Yakoub reflects on this key event, and on three recent artworks inspired by it.

In 2021, we are not only commemorating 150 years of the Paris Commune, but also 10 years of re-emerging planetary revolts. In the same way the story of Communards cannot properly be told without mentioning the fall of the Vendôme Column, the tale of the most recent upsurges of revolt cannot properly be told without mentioning the intensification of what Bhakti Shringarpure called a "rage against monuments" (*Warscapes*, 2012). An archipelago of decolonial rage is spontaneously bursting out worldwide, targeting public statues that until today glorify the legacy of slavery, imperialism and colonization. From the settler colonial states of South Africa, the U.S., Canada, New Zealand, and Australia to the heart of the Empire in France, Belgium, and England, recent protests broke the polis in two. The national heroes sculpted in bronze revered by some, seem to represent contempt, injustice, oppression and clear cut genocide for others, rendering visible a deep societal antagonism, going beyond the classical "left-right" binary opposition.

It is in this light paramount to question, what is still left of the left and how to reconstruct from this monumental debris new caring forms of planetary alliances, solidarities that could prefigure new ways of inhabiting the world in freedom and dignity. As we will see, finding answers to this urgent question will require a decisive dose of what Houria Bouteldja calls "revolutionary love" (2016). To understand what is at stake when implicitly criticizing the coloniality of the left, we will look at the various ways present-day visual artists are returning to the orchestrated fall of the Column exalting Napoleonic imperialism during the Paris Commune, rearticulating international solidarity into possible forms of translocal solidarity. We will do so by speaking nearby Édouard Glissant, as he recurrently stated that each one of us needs the memory of the other in the lucid process of what he called Relation, or in his own words "if we want to share the beauty of the world, if we want to be in solidarity with its sufferings, we must learn to remember together" (*Une nouvelle région du monde*, 2006).

But let us first start by contrasting the internationalist spirit of the Paris Commune with a very sharp but loving critique by one of the main political philosophers of the anti-colonial struggle: Frantz Fanon. After the Vendôme Column was toppled in Paris in May 1871, official Communards cheerfully announced the celebrating crowd "Vendôme Square"will henceforth be named "International Square." This short lived toponymic reversal marked a rupture from the inheritance of the French Revolution towards a real working-class internationalism. As reminded by Kristin Ross in her remarkable book *Communal Luxury* (2015), according to Communard Benoît Malon, the destruction of the Vendôme Column fundamentally questioned the supposed inevitability of imperial wars. It promoted a spirit of anti-nationalism and international fraternity. The Paris Commune was more apt to relate to an international constellation of insurgency than to a nationalist imaginary, including the Indian revolt against British racial capitalism, the uprisings during Black Reconstruction in North America, rebellions in Ireland, Hungary, Poland, and the freedom struggle of the serfs in Russia, or the simultaneous Kabyle uprising in Algeria.

Let us also not forget that the combative words of *L'Internationale* were initially written during the bloody executions of the overpowered Communards by influential poet, transport worker and founding member of the Artists' Federation, Eugène Pottier. Communard Pottier indeed wrote the poem *L'Internationale*, which became the International Workingmen's Association hymn before it was adopted by the Second International as its official anthem and consequently translated and chanted in many different languages. Almost 100 years later, Fanon adopted the by then famed first line of 'The Internationale' as the title of his ground-breaking book *Les Damnés de la Terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*) as a sharp but loving gesture, critiquing the universalist pretenses of the European working class movements. From its onset the labor movement encountered difficulties to relate to different slave revolts overseas, but also to the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements, and the following planetary wave of decolonial revolts. When Fanon, proposed to turn our back to Europe, he proposed to also turn our back to the European working class and its self-proclaimed internationalism, as he said: "in general, the workers of Europe have not replied to these calls; for the workers believe, too, that they are part of the prodigious adventure of the European spirit."

Despite its historical longevity and the countless reiterations of this Fanonian critique, different present-day visual artists are revisiting the orchestrated fall of the imperial Column during the Paris Commune, all the while reanimating its internationalist spirit. South African architect Roanne Moodley, U.S. historian and architect David Gissen, and Tunisian artist Nidhal Chamekh, excavate, each in their own way, the fall of the Vendôme Column so central in the storytelling of the Paris Commune, all along connecting this event to its imperial and colonial reverse tracing routes to the African continent, more specifically the Maghreb in general, Tunisia in particular, as well as Réunion island. Following the routes of these three artists, an impression will be drawn of what Glissant called a *Tout-Monde*, relating different temporalities across continents in the subversion of a shared modernist monumental landscape.

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In what follows the attempts to overthrow the Vendôme Column by the Communards in 1871 in Paris, the Novemberist Clock Tower in Tunis in 2011, and the Victory Column in Réunion will therefore be excavated from the perspective of radical simultaneity. This perspective of coevalness preempts anachronistic comparisons underpinning the bigoted idea that Arabs, Blacks, Imazighen, Creole, Muslims, and Maroons would be late or backward, and are only now catching up with the train of History. It is indispensable to underline, that while France lost the 1870-1871 war with Prussia and the Communards were fighting the bourgeois in Paris, the massive Mokrani Revolt against the French colonial project was gaining momentum in Algeria and people were resisting colonial competition between France, England, and Italy, as they all wished to settle in Tunisia. It is also key to emphasize that, while Tunisians were revolting against the postcolonial authoritarian regime of Ben Ali, they were revolting against a regime economically and politically fully supported by a still very imperialist French government. It is equally vital to remember, that while in 2011 Tunisia, the people were demanding to overthrow the regime, in France the masses also occupied the squares, stood up day and night with the workers in yellow vests against neo-liberal austerity, together with a resurgence of anti-racism activism against police violence. Let us not forget either that Réunion island, together with Guadeloupe, Guiana, Martinique, and Mayotte, is today still a so-called "overseas department" and "prefecture" of the French Republic. Even if the current French president stated that the Republic will not erase any trace or name from its history, nor unbolt any of its statue, two statues of French politician Victor Schœlcher and the already beheaded statue of Napoléon's wife, Empress Joséphine de Beauharnais were recently toppled in Martinique. While those of Colbert, Gallieni, Bugeaud, Faidherbe, or Mangin were contested in France, people in Réunion were simultaneously trying to get rid of their statue of François Mahé de La Bourdonnais. Nobody could prevent the planetary puncturing of the prevailing consent of a shared history of slavery, colonialism and racism.

Retracing a planetary constellation of decolonial rage as an answer to the slow degeneration of the contemporary white neoliberal world, suggests a deep engagement with the political possibility of what Houria Bouteldja following Chela Sandoval, calls "revolutionary love." It is from the possibility of revolutionary love that political differences between the debris of the left and a new emerging decolonial constituency can be transcended. From this possibility, it is imaginable to remember both the recent decade of revolt, together with the sesquicentennial of the Paris Commune. Desirable solidarities between what is left of the left after it is broken in two and what is spontaneously emerging from the backdoor of history of decolonization are reshaping our understanding

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of intersectionality. Re-animating the spirit of the Combahee River Collective and as repeatedly underlined by Angela Davis, the meaning of intersectionality shifts from an intricate understanding of layered forms of oppression, to the necessity of incessant labor on the intersections of a shared struggle against various intersecting racial capitalist formations, symbolized by the fall of upright phallic monuments. In the light of revolutionary love, intersecting oppressions transform into intersecting struggles. Overthinking the constructive side of the anticipated destruction of these monuments and incessantly asking questions while walking, are then the conditions of possibility to see one of the many possible ways towards another more sustainable and just world, towards a world in which many worlds fit.

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The Twin Transcripts by Roanne Moodley ///

With *The Twin Transcripts* (2018), Durban-based architect Roanne Moodley re-imagines the French “*Fête Nationale*,” also known as “Bastille Day,” through a provocative and speculative design of a reconciliatory monumental exchange. Twinning the French town of Montreuil, a banlieue on the fringes of Paris where different African diasporic communities live, to Saint-Denis, the Creole capital of Réunion Island, she makes space to question very present colonial relationalities traversing France and its tropical “overseas prefecture” off the east coast of the African continent. Through processes of ghosting, reflecting, altering, and transplanting in the finely drawn graphic short fiction, Moodley imagines a monumental gift exchange between the Vendôme Column and Réunion’s Victory Column. By importing the Creole Festival of Mixed Freedom to the banlieue of Montreuil in the French capital, she not only creates the right event and setting for this rather uncanny gift exchange, but also disrupts the coinciding imperial military parade memorializing the mythical birth of the Republican Nation on both sides of the ocean, with the too often silenced memory of the struggle against the massive enslavement enforced by the French East India Company.

The (white) elephant in the room here is Napoléon Bonaparte, as one of the main formal differences between the Vendôme and the Victory Column. The Vendôme Column was erected at Napoléon’s direction as a potent symbol of France victory over Prussia in Austerlitz in 1805. The bronze statue of Bonaparte at the top of the original Vendôme Column in 1810, sculpted by Antoine-Denis Chaudet, depicts the French statesman and military leader dressed in Roman attire, bare-headed and crowned with laurels, holding a sword in his right hand and a globe surmounted with a statue of the roman goddess Victory in his left hand. Whereas on top of the erectile pole of the Victory Column in Réunion, the triumphant roman goddess stands alone, to form with its pedestal a cenotaph commemorating and honoring the Reunionese soldiers who died during World War I. Let’s not forget Réunion was shortly re-named “Bonaparte Island,” before it was seized by the British during the Napoleonic Wars. The planned “re-erection” of the Column is for Moodley then an “anti-erection” or a form of subversion, as only the small Caesarian statue of Napoléon (without the 34 meter high tower) would be exposed on the street level of Réunionese Rue de Paris. To paraphrase Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, the “overseas prefecture” of Réunion might in itself be imagined as a monument that must fall, an imaginative act of potential history.

The Mound Vendôme by David Gissen ///

The Mound of Vendôme (2014) is an installation by historian and architect David Gissen that documents the failed petitioned proposition to reconstruct the heap of dirt built by the Paris Commune to break the fall of the Vendôme Column in 1871. It also showcases a series of important archival photographs and engravings documenting the urban square before and after the orchestrated demolition of the Column. The installation returns to the key moment, when on April 12, 1871, the Commune voted on a decree written by Félix Pyat proposing to demolish the imperial Column. The decree stated that it symbolizes barbarism, brutal force, and

The Vendome Column is buried in Saint-Denis, La Réunion. / Artwork from *The Twin Transcripts* (2018) by Roanne Moodley.

Photomontages from *The Mound of Vendôme* (2014). / Artwork by David Gissen.

false glory as it is an affirmation of militarism and a negation of international law. It was seen as a permanent insult and a perpetual attack on the republican principle of fraternity. The demolition was planned for Napoléon’s death anniversary on May 5, but had to be delayed to meet all the required preparations, as we will see in more detail below. The Communards assembled a bed of fascines of hay, sand, and manure along the axis of the Rue de la Paix on both sides for more than 10 meters to cushion the Column’s fall and dampen its vibrations. All the surrounding storefronts and neighboring buildings on the square were closed, and the windows covered. Even with all the precautions, people were afraid that the Column would crash into the surrounding houses in the square or would cause the Opera House sewers to collapse. Instead of echoing the reiterated demand to destroy again the reconstructed Column, Gissen designed collage images and launched a petition to imagine and materialize again the mound of hay, sand, and manure at the foot of the Column. The petition circulated among architects, architectural historians, theorists, and students of architecture throughout the United States and Europe, and was delivered to the director of the Paris Heritage and Architecture Services — with no avail. With this project Gissen intended what he calls a form of “radical reconstruction,” relating histories of social movements, to propose the resurgence of political histories through processes of architectural and urban reconstruction. The failed proposition indeed shows the contemporary reluctance to re-invent revolutionary symbols, and the refusal of the public to be inspired by the Communards’ ingenious ways to carefully reshape the modern urban fabric.

The Anti-Clock Project by Nidhal Chamekh ///

Inspired by the ingenious destruction of the Vendôme Column, visual artist Nidhal Chamekh proposes in the *Anti-Clock Project* (2015) to demolish the infamous Mongela, also known as the November 7 Clock tower in the center of Tunis during the most recent uprisings in 2011. All the references to November 7 and others references to the numerological cult of the Ben Ali regime in public space were destroyed by the revolting masses, with the exception of the master signifier of the authoritarian landscape. One of the eleven graphite drawings, extending Chamekh’s 3D printed cartographic installation, renders visible the detailed demolition plan of the Commune’s responsible engineer Jules Iribe. To avoid any collateral damage to the fabric of the Vendôme Square, Iribe had foreseen to attach a triple rope to the top of the Column, connecting it to a capstan held on the ground by an anchor. Monitored closely by an astronomical telescope, the efforts of half a dozen men made the capstan turn and the three cables tighten and slowly come together. By operating the capstan, the Column had to give way to its base where it was sawn horizontally a little above the pedestal, and eventually fell on the bed of fascines.

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The German poet Heinrich Heine anticipated 30 years earlier the imperial Column and its “Iron Man” could again be overthrown by the “rage of radical equality.” Karl Marx too sensed the coming fall of the Vendôme Column in his 1852 political essay *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. The repetition of history as a farce would inevitably mean that the revolutionary working class could eventually annihilate Bonapartism. Or in his own words “if the Imperial mantle finally falls on the shoulders of Louis Bonaparte, the bronze statue of Napoléon will fall from the height of the Vendôme Column.” In the wake of the battle of Sedan, and the defeat of Louis-Napoléon in the Franco-Prussian War in September 1870, the symbols of the Bonapartist regime were purged out of the body politic. The painter Gustave Courbet, president of the Federation of Artists and elected member of the Commune, launched a petition to disassembled this monument “devoid of all artistic value” and move it to the Hôtel des Invalides next to other artefacts dealing with the military history of France, as the implicit sarcasm of an imperial monument venerating the ideals of war and conquest located on Rue de la Paix became untenable.

Alas, contrary to the premonitions of Heine, Marx, and the petitioned proposal of Courbet, Chamekh his visionary proposition to demolish the November 7 Clock and subvert it as a new memorial site of the Tunisian revolution did not materialize, yet. The 37-meter high tower, still stands today on January 14 Square, forming the last layer of a colonial

Graphite drawings for The Anti-Clock Project (2015) by Nidhal Chamekh **Left.** Burning obelisk. Anniversary of the islamic Revolution. Iran, 2011. **Right.** Egyptian revolutionaries carrying an obelisk with the martyr's names. Tahrir square, Egypt, 2012.

palimpsest that started taking shape during the inauguration of Jules Ferry Square in 1911. The Mongela is indeed erected on exactly the same place where once a monument stood in honor of Jules Ferry. During the inaugural ceremony, the sculpture was saluted as the first statue raised in Tunisia since the fall of the Roman Empire, comparing Jules Ferry to a Roman consul. Whereas, in Tunis, Jules Ferry was venerated by the French as the man that embodies the idea of civilization behind the first overseas thrust of the Third Republic and pushed for the establishment of the French Protectorate in Tunisia in 1881. In the Paris of the Communard he was despised as "Ferry-Famine" or "Ferry the Starver," as in the wake of the defeat of Louis-Napoléon in the Prussian War, he did not manage, as member of the government of National Defense, to ensure enough food supply as the capital was besieged by the Prussian army. He was nevertheless appointed mayor of Paris, but from the first day of the Communal insurrection, he instantly fled the city. The depiction of "Ferry the Starver" as a cowardly imperialist republican, would have certainly resonated really well with the ideas many Tunisians did not dare to speak out loud during the French colonial protectorate. Eventually the statue of Ferry was unbolted, but later replaced by an equestrian statue of "El Moujahid El Akbar" Habib Bourguiba, and eventually followed by the Novemberist Clock Tower as both stand today in the capital.

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After imperial or colonial statues are unbolted, breaking the polis in two, it seems incumbent to gather in the monumental debris what is still useful, to carefully deliberate what could still be valuable to relate with and what is not. Today, as much as it was 150 years ago, laboring the intersections, the nodes between different struggles so communalities become intelligible remains inevitable and vital. But imperialist and colonial monuments appear to be stubborn and resilient edifices. Fanon might have proposed to turn our back to Europe, including its working class and its self-proclaimed internationalism, as they are part of the prodigious Universalist spirit anti-colonial movements are fighting against. He nevertheless oversaw the secular illusion or the impossibility to separate the entangled worlds in the lived experience of diasporic or creolized subjectivities. Abdelkabir Khatibi by contrast engages in his seminal book *Maghreb Pluriel* (1983) in a thorough questioning of the conception of this European game that for Fanon has apparently definitively ended. As that European game inhabits Khatibi's most intimate being — not as an absolute and devastating exteriority but as a conglomerate of difference — he reclaims an inalienable right to this difference. It is hard work. But the inseparability of entangled worlds in the lived experience of diasporic or creolized subjectivities, can then be mobilized in a productive and critical way. This is made clear in the provocative reversal central in Moodley's *Twin Transcripts*, to re-animate new forms of solidarity and fundamentally rethink obsolete historical forms of internationalism from below, re-articulating them in translocal solidarities to bypass any form of nationalism.

Left. Destruction of the Vendôme's Column upon order of Gustave Courbet during the Paris Commune, 1871. **Right.** U.S. marines destroying the statue of Saddam Hussein at Firdos square in Baghdad. Iraq, 2003.

From this hybrid understanding of our subjectivities it is clear that we inhabit the manifold Manichean binaries proper to racial capitalism, and that we just cannot turn our back to the internationalist spirit of the Paris Commune. As shown in the drawing of Chamekh's *Anti-Clock Project*, these binary contradictions, whether in Paris in 1871 or Tunis in 2011 can only be undone and disentangled through relational and collective forms of ingenious labor, unbolting a monument after all implies meticulously engineered preparations. The measurements have moreover necessarily to take into account the materiality of that monument. Panafrorevolutionary collective Cases Rebelles reminds us that the intensified demands to dismantle imperial monuments venerating these presupposed national heroes, are not merely symbolic demands, but demands for justice, tightly linked to infrastructural demands of reparations (see The Funambulist 30 *Reparations*, 2020).

It might be too messy or speculative to include the monumental contestation of the Paris Commune in the denomination of decolonial rage. The abstract expression and universal condemnation of colonialism and imperialism is after all something fundamentally different than forging real relations of solidarity and care with anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggles on the ground. But let this messy speculation be part of a larger necessary exercise in revolutionary love. Both the survivors of the defeated Mokrani revolt in Algeria and the defeated Commune were in the end and after all both sitting side by side, both dispossessed and incarcerated in the same French prison in New Caledonia on Kanak land, thinking of their loved ones alike and their vanished dream of liberty and dignity. As we learned from Gissen's petitioned proposal of radical reconstruction in *The Mound of Vendôme*, we can anticipate the demolition of monuments, and carefully prepare the bed on which it would fall to preserve the urban fabric to be damaged. Overthinking collectively the possible erasure of monuments is then a condition to see and feel the horizon. Excavating overlapping and interconnected monumental histories, might inspire a renewed breath of revolutionary love, so necessary in this time of generalized suffocation and internal fragmentation. This archeological exercise might inspire possible new translocal solidarities, more caring forms of planetary alliances, that could prefigure new ways of inhabiting another world in freedom and dignity, a world where many different worlds fit. ■

Joachim Ben Yakoub is a writer, researcher and lecturer operating on the border of different art schools and institutions. He is affiliated to the MENARG and S:PAM research group of Ghent University, where he is conducting research on the aesthetics of revolt somewhere in between Tunisia and Belgium. He is guest professor at LUCA school of Arts Brussels and lecturer at Sint-Lucas School of Arts Antwerp, where he is also promotor of the collective action research *The Archives of the Tout-Monde*.